

"It's a bait, I'm sure of it."

The tension was thick in the safehouse. Rumors had spread like wildfire, whispers slipping through every corner and hallway. Ramsey was coming. He had found the mole, they said, and he was going to unmask him in front of everyone.

Marco and Polo stood by the far wall, their eyes darting to the hushed conversations around them.

"A bait, like last time?" Polo whispered, eyes wide. "You think he's bluffing again?"

"Absolutely," Marco replied, his voice a harsh whisper. "Ramsey's just trying to scare us. He has nothing."

Polo's gaze dropped to the floor. "But what if... what if he really found out?" he asked, his voice wavering.

Marco shot him a cold look. "He doesn't know a thing. Stop acting guilty—it makes you look weak."



Nearby, a maid moved through the room, her tray laden with glasses. Polo's gaze lingered on her, his nerves fraying.

"You're sure?" Polo murmured, biting his lip. "I can't shake this feeling. Maybe you can handle this, Marco, but I'm not built for it. I never wanted any of this... you dragged me into it."

Marco's face hardened. "We're brothers, Polo. We're in this together. We do everything together, remember?"

"Together?" Polo let out a bitter laugh, his voice thick with frustration. "It's always your plan, your decisions. I just get caught up in your schemes, and look where we are now. I wanted out after the Ruvana mess—you shot her, Marco! And now, this 'mole' accusation... how much longer can we keep this up?"

As the maid passed behind them, Marco clenched his fists, his voice lowering. "Don't let your conscience trip you up now, Polo. Hiram's got a plan. He's going to make us all rich, take over everything. We just have to play along."

Polo shook his head. "Hiram's plan? You're kidding, right? This isn't even our mob anymore, Marco. Heartlands used to be ours, and now we're just one of his pawns. The allied members... they're everywhere."

Marco forced a reassuring smile, but his eyes betrayed a flicker of uncertainty. "Don't worry about them. They're just muscle. The real power—"

"No, Marco," Polo cut him off, shaking his head. "You've been saying that for weeks. But I see the looks they give us, the whispering. They're just waiting for a chance to pull us down." He paused, swallowing hard. "What if they know, Marco? What if we're not as safe as you think?"

Marco's face twisted with anger. "Stop letting fear get the best of you. This is the Heartlands—we've got allies. Hiram has a vision, and we're part of it."

"Vision? Hiram's got us both by the throat, and you can't see it!" Polo's voice broke, and he took a shaky breath. "I'm done, Marco. I'm not sticking around to see how this ends."

Marco's expression shifted to shock. "Polo, wait—"

"No," Polo interrupted, his gaze steely. "I'm leaving. I don't care about Hiram's promises anymore. All I know is... Ramsey's coming, and I'm not waiting to find out what he'll do."



Without waiting for Marco's response, Polo slipped quietly from his seat, weaving his way toward the back exit. He shot one last look at Marco, who shook his head in frustration, but Polo didn't care anymore. He moved quickly, his heart pounding as he reached the back door, slipped outside, and disappeared into the night.

The door clicked shut behind him, and as he glanced back through a narrow window, he noticed something else: the maid was nowhere to be seen. She had been moving through the room only a moment ago, serving drinks to everyone... and then vanished, just as quietly.

But Polo didn't linger to think about it; he was gone, his shadow disappearing down the alleyway.

The door swung open, and Ramsey entered with a commanding presence. His gaze swept across the room, scanning each face, each expression. His steps were slow, deliberate, his every movement brimming with authority. As he passed, men straightened, silence cloaked the room, and any whisper died on the air. The weight of his gaze alone seemed enough to suffocate any objections. He didn't hurry, taking his time, his footsteps echoing against the tension until he reached the center of the room.

Ramsey paused, looking up at everyone gathered around, his eyes sharp and unreadable. His voice was smooth, calm—a dangerous calm that sent chills down the spines of everyone listening.

"Alright... I guess you know why I'm here."

The murmurings picked up again, a low, anxious buzz. Ramsey waited, letting it simmer, before he spoke once more.

"The past week has been hell for all of us. Some more than others, some less, but hell nonetheless." He glanced across the room, catching the flicker of unease in their eyes. "In fact, I would even

say hell is putting it lightly. We've seen losses. Not just of men, but of morale, of security, of trust." He let that last word hang heavy, cutting into the silence like a blade.

"You see," he continued, "our foundation—this very operation—relies on unity, loyalty, trust in one another. But when that trust is exploited, when a wolf dresses in sheep's clothing... well, everything falls apart, doesn't it?"

The room was deathly quiet, everyone hanging on his words, the suspense thickening.

"Someone," he said, letting the word ring out slowly, "amongst us, has twisted that trust. And this 'someone' has hidden in plain sight, poisoning every effort we've made, dragging us down like stones in quicksand." He looked directly at a few faces, though none lingered long enough to show his suspicion outright.

"You know," he added, tone hardening, "we've been attacked from within, sabotaged on all fronts. Some of the close calls I've had, the 'accidents,' the things that could have killed us all... they weren't mere coincidence. Someone here wanted it to happen. And while some of us stood by, working to hold everything together, someone... was busy loosening every bolt, weakening us from the inside out."

Ramsey took a step toward the stairs, as though moving toward an invisible line between him and his audience, as if daring any one of them to cross it.

"I could give you a name right now," he said, voice dropping to a deadly calm, "but that would be too easy, wouldn't it? Instead, I'll tell you about a pattern. This 'someone' has been planting seeds of mistrust for weeks, tipping off certain members, orchestrating chaos while hiding behind a mask of loyalty. This person knew exactly where I'd be, knew exactly when to make a move. I'd even go as far as saying they played us like a damn game board."

A ripple of unease swept through the crowd, shifting on their feet, some with eyes cast downward. The tension climbed with every syllable he uttered, the suspense of the unknown threading through the air like a knife waiting to drop.

"Yes, that someone played the perfect hand, an ace up their sleeve, because they thought—no, they knew—they could outwit us all. They thought they were the only one in control, invisible, untouchable, and smarter than anyone in this room."

Ramsey's gaze sharpened, zeroing in on Marco, though he didn't acknowledge him directly, letting his words cut through with ominous intent.

"And that someone knows I'm not here to toy with them. I'm not here to beat around the bush or chase shadows. I'm here to restore order, to remind everyone here that there are consequences for betrayal, no matter how clever the traitor might think they are."

The room was suffocating with tension now, the men's eyes darting nervously around, each trying to piece together Ramsey's words, to discern who among them he was pointing at without saying a name.

"And so," he continued, voice lowering, "let this be a warning. The clock is ticking, and that someone's time has just about run out. There's no place left to hide, no ally left to protect you. If you're thinking about making a move, I suggest you do it now—while you still have time."

Ramsey paused, letting the words linger, his eyes never leaving Marco's as he finally said, almost in a whisper but heard by everyone in the room, "Because that 'someone' is about to be exposed, and there will be no mercy."

Ramsey held up a small, sleek USB drive between his fingers, his gaze sweeping over the tense faces before him. He turned to the white screen hanging in front of the room, his expression unreadable, and spoke with a chilling calm.

"And this," he said, raising his voice just enough to fill the room, "is where I have it. The truth, unmasked. For everyone to see." He paused, letting the weight of his words settle on the crowd. "Some of you may think you're clever enough to know every blind spot, every hidden corner where the surveillance cameras can't reach. But here's the fun part: those were never the real cameras."

He allowed a smirk to cross his lips, seeing a few nervous glances exchanged around the room. "I have my own set of eyes, placed

where no one would ever think to look. No one except the mole, of course, who made sure to be just out of sight of the 'main' cameras. But these cameras? They've seen it all." He twirled the USB drive between his fingers. "And now, you will, too."

The tension became a nearly tangible force as Ramsey walked to the projector, sliding the USB drive into its slot with deliberate, confident ease. Meanwhile, Marco's face paled, beads of sweat forming on his brow as his mind raced.

"No, no... this can't be happening." His voice was barely a whisper, a frantic tremor. "But Hiram said... he said Ramsey didn't know. He said we'd be safe. This isn't... this isn't possible..."

Polo, still lingering near the back, looked on with wide eyes as Marco's desperation grew, his face contorting with a blend of anger and fear. "I have to stop this," Marco muttered, a shaky resolve taking hold. "I... I can't let him play that footage. I have to do something!"

Glancing nervously at Ramsey, who was focused on setting up the footage, Marco reached a hand into his pocket. His fingers brushed against the cold metal of the concealed gun, his breathing growing heavier. With one last desperate look around, he began to raise his arm, the gun moving into position.

Just as his finger hovered over the trigger, a thunderous gunshot rang out, slicing through the thick tension like a knife. Marco's body jolted, his eyes widening in shock. Blood seeped from his head

spreading across the floor. A horrified silence filled the room as Marco staggered, gasping, his legs giving way beneath him.

Marco's body slumped, his wide, glassy eyes staring into nothingness, a single bullet hole perfectly centered in his forehead. Blood pooled swiftly beneath him, a vivid, dark stain against the cold concrete floor. His hand, which had been so close to pulling his own weapon, fell limp at his side, fingers barely brushing the grip of the gun he would never get to use.

Ramsey turned sharply, his expression a mix of shock and fury as he realized he hadn't fired the shot. He glanced upwards, where the echo of the gunshot still lingered, and saw the shadowed figure of Hiram standing on the top floor, a gun still smoking in his hand.

The shot had been swift, precise, calculated—Hiram's face was as cold as stone, unreadable. From above, he looked down at the chaos below, his gaze locking with Ramsey's. The entire warehouse was filled with the smell of gunpowder, the aftermath of the shot heavy in the air, as everyone below tried to process what had just happened.



Outside, in the dimly lit back alley, the maid—Tiffany, clad in disguise—paused. She had been moving quickly, carrying a large sack over her shoulder, her steps light and cautious. But the gunshot halted her in her tracks. She straightened, holding her breath as the sound reverberated through the quiet night.

For a brief second, she glanced back toward the warehouse, her expression a mixture of worry and anticipation, before slipping away into the shadows, disappearing into the night with her burden in hand.

Inside, Ramsey and Hiram continued their silent standoff, the weight of betrayal now fully laid bare in the blood pooling on the floor.

"Marco, you reckless fool..." Hiram murmured, his voice low but carrying just enough for those closest to hear.

The hush that had fallen over the room thickened, weighed down by the shock and suddenness of it all. Hiram finally holstered his gun, descending the stairs in slow, measured steps, his gaze never leaving Ramsey. The crowd parted as he moved, no one daring to question what had just happened. They knew Hiram too well to cross him in moments like these.

Ramsey's jaw tightened, and he took a steadying breath, his eyes narrowing with a hint of fury that only Hiram seemed to catch. Hiram paused, his face softening just slightly as he reached Ramsey, looking him over as though expecting a reaction but receiving only stony silence.

"Had to be done, boss," Hiram said, shrugging with a nonchalance that left everyone else uneasy. "Couldn't let him put you—or any of us—at risk. I'll take care of this, just like everything else."

The words hung in the air, cold and final, as Ramsey held his gaze, unyielding.

The tension in the room had reached a fever pitch. Ramsey, his face taut with barely contained anger, took a step closer to Hiram, locking eyes with him.

Ramsey: "What the hell, Hiram! You went for a kill in the middle of our own men? And on what—your hunch?"

Hiram shrugged, a crooked smile creeping onto his face. "What? I couldn't let the guy harm you. You saw him reaching for his gun. You're the boss; protecting you is my job."

Ramsey's eyes narrowed, his voice cold. "Protecting me, or silencing him? Because to me, that looked a lot more like cleaning up loose ends."

Hiram didn't flinch, meeting Ramsey's gaze without a hint of remorse. "Look around, Ramsey," he said, gesturing toward the gathered mob members, who were still reeling from the sight of Marco's lifeless body. "His head was the only part visible through the crowd. It was an easy shot, and it stopped him from doing something stupid."

Ramsey clenched his jaw, struggling to keep his tone measured. "So you decided to take that shot in front of everyone, without hesitation, and without consulting me?"

Hiram's smile faded slightly as he looked at Ramsey, his eyes hardening. "I did what had to be done. But tell me... what about the 'secret cameras'? The USB? This little show you're putting on—how come I don't know about any of it?"

A tugged at the corner of Ramsey's mouth. He slowly held up the USB, the crowd watching in tense silence.

Ramsey: "There was none. No recordings, no hidden surveillance. It was all a bait, a carefully laid trap to see if the real mole would panic and make a move."

Hiram's face fell for a split second, his surprise barely concealed before he covered it with another cold smile. "A bait?"

Ramsey held his gaze, unblinking. "And it seems," he said, his voice dropping to a low, dangerous whisper, "that someone took it."

That is how **Day 1 ended.**

Day 2

The room was dim, a vast warehouse hollowed out by darkness, with only a few flickering bulbs struggling against the shadows. The air was thick, laden with the scent of cold steel and dust—a sterile, foreboding silence that seemed to swallow sound itself.

In the center of the room, bound to a chair, sat Polo. His head drooped forward, the weight of unconsciousness slowly lifting. Then, with a sharp intake of breath, his eyes shot open, unfocused and darting around, trying to make sense of his surroundings. Every corner looked menacing, every shadow seemed alive.

Suddenly, a sharp, high-pitched voice crackled from a speaker overhead, distorted and robotic, echoing through the cavernous room.

"Wakey, wakey..."

Polo jerked at the sound, blinking rapidly. "Where... where am I?"

The voice chuckled, a warped, unnatural sound that made Polo's skin prickle. "Where? Everybody asks where, but nobody asks how. Aren't you... worried about yourself, Polo?"

A slow, mocking laugh echoed, each note dripping with a dark amusement that sent a chill down Polo's spine.

His voice shook, but he forced defiance into his words. "What... Where the hell is this! Who are you?!"

"Oh, that is something you don't need to know," the voice replied, cold and calculating. "But you know what... I need to know something from you."

Polo straightened, clenching his fists against the restraints. He spat back, "Go to hell. I won't say anything!"

"Is that so?" The voice seemed to hiss, dripping with a menacing charm. "You're not afraid, little guy?"

"No, I'm not!" Polo's voice cracked with tension. "Especially not from cowards who hide themselves!"

The voice laughed again, a low, eerie sound. "Fiesty, aren't you. But here's the thing—you won't be leaving anytime soon." The voice dropped, turning colder. "Not until I get what I want."

Polo strained against the bindings, his jaw clenched tight. "Screw you!"

The lights flickered violently, and the laughter came again, this time softer, more sinister.

Suddenly, a jolt of electricity surged through the chair, lighting up Polo's body in a flash of agony. His scream tore through the silence, raw and guttural, echoing off the walls of the dimly lit warehouse.

The voice cut in, almost amused. "You see, I don't have time to waste, Polo. So unless..."

"Okay, okay! I'll speak!" Polo choked out, his voice trembling with fear and exhaustion.

A soft hum, chilling and controlled. "Good. Let's start from the beginning, shall we?" The voice dropped lower, the menace lingering in each word. "Who do you actually work for?"

Polo hesitated, his breath ragged. "Someone... very powerful."

The voice chuckled, cold and mocking. "Powerful? I know all the powerful people, Polo. And it's certainly not the Boss, now, is it?"

Polo's defenses crumbled, and he finally caved. "It's... it's Hiram. I work for him."

"Good boy," the voice purred. "Now, let's dig a little deeper, shall we? The shipment—it was rigged. Care to share who arranged that little surprise?"

Polo shifted in his seat, his pulse racing. He could feel the cold eyes of his interrogator behind every flickering shadow. "W-which shipment are you talking about?"

The voice let out a sharp, cutting laugh. "Oh, don't act naive, Polo. You're smarter than that, aren't you? The shipment for the mob, the one with the bomb hidden inside. That shipment."

Polo swallowed, beads of sweat lining his brow. "Oh... that one. Well..."

The electric hum returned, like a predator circling its prey. "My hands are itching to press this button again, Polo..."

"Okay, okay!" Polo blurted, fear cracking his voice. "It was Hiram. He planned it. He told me and Marco to rig the shipment. Marco went with Ramsey to the docks... and I handled the setup ahead of time."

"Interesting," the voice mused, satisfaction curling around each syllable. "And what about locking up the warehouse? Leaving the docks cleared?"

"That..." Polo's breathing was shallow, his pulse racing. "That was Hiram's idea too. Marco was supposed to... misinterpret Ramsey's orders. Told the others to clear out so no one would be around. Just in case..."

"Just in case," the voice echoed approvingly. "Now, Polo... let's discuss the poison."

Polo's eyes shot wide, his voice barely a whisper. "The... poison?"

"Yes, the poison," the voice repeated, dark and slow. "The one meant for The Boss. Don't tell me you didn't know, Polo. You know everything... don't you?"

Polo's lips quivered, his mind racing, every secret inching closer to unraveling under that relentless voice.

Polo - "I do not have any knowledge about the poison you are talking about."

Voice - "Hmm..."

Polo - "Please... let me go. I just want out of this life."

Voice - "Oh, so soon? But we've barely bonded. I still have questions. Many, many questions... like the messages. The ones sent from burner phones to throw the Boss off your trail."

Polo swallowed, visibly sweating. "That was Hiram's plan too... He had us send them. Told us to make sure the Boss was always looking the wrong way, doubting everyone."

Voice - "Good. Good. See, it's easy when you cooperate. Simple question, simple answer." There was a pause, then the voice grew darker. "Now, what about the accident— Javier's accident. Who caused it?"

Polo hesitated, glancing around as though searching for some way out. "It—it was Marco... but only on Hiram's orders! Hiram said Javier had something important, something he needed. So, we set up the accident, timed it perfectly. We got what Hiram wanted and handed it over."

Voice - "And this 'something important'... Where is it now?"

Polo - "I don't know! We gave it to Hiram, and he... he never let us see it again. That's all I know, I swear."

Voice - "Hmm. Convenient, isn't it?" The voice grew colder, almost a whisper. "Now... one last question. Javier didn't die in the accident. He died in that hospital. So tell me, who killed him there?"

Polo's eyes darted around, panic flashing in his gaze. "I... I don't know—"

Suddenly, a brutal jolt of electricity tore through him, wrenching a scream from his throat, his body convulsing violently.

Voice - "WHO killed Javier at the hospital?"

Polo - "I swear, I don't know! Hiram never told us anything about that ... please, please, I beg you, that's all I know!"

The speaker's voice was icy, chilling. "How convenient... and how disappointing."

Polo, shivering and broken, looked desperately around, as though hoping someone would save him. The silence that followed was filled with a dark tension, an anticipation that made the air thick, ominous.

Voice - "Well then... lastly, tell me. What is Hiram's ultimate goal?"

Polo's voice was barely above a whisper, his fear weighing down every word. "Total control..."

Voice - "Total control?" The voice dripped with mockery, as though savoring the irony.

Polo nodded shakily, his gaze fixed on the ground. "Yes... Hiram said he's been waiting for this, gathering pieces and keeping them close. He said he's found something, a piece of information... something that could destroy the Boss. Once he's gone, Hiram will step in and take over. Every last piece of the Heartland empire."

Voice - "Interesting. And how exactly does he plan to execute this... master plan of his?"

Polo swallowed, a tremor passing through him. "By... by testing Heartlands from the inside out. He's filling it with people loyal only to him—members from rival gangs, planted inside to make it look like alliances. But it's all for one reason..."

Voice - "And that is?"

Polo took a deep breath, his voice breaking under the weight of his confession. "To create chaos. To make things so unpredictable, so unmanageable, that the Boss won't be able to trust anyone. Hiram said he wants the Boss to feel like he's drowning, to be second-guessing everything and everyone. He's betting that in the end... the Boss will either crumble or be forced out."

Voice - "And what makes Hiram think the Boss won't notice?"

Polo shuddered. "Hiram is always two steps ahead. He's been building this for years. All those shipments, the mishaps, the alliances with gangs that shouldn't even be working together... it's all been orchestrated to seem like bad luck, like the Heartlands is coming undone naturally. And Hiram... he's the 'savior' with a plan, stepping in just when the Boss seems to be failing."

Voice - "So, Hiram intends to tear the Boss apart from the inside... make him question every single decision, every ally, until he's isolated and vulnerable?"

Polo nodded, his face pale. "Exactly. Hiram said... the Boss's strength has always been his control. But if that control is tested,

broken, and he's left with nothing but uncertainty... he'll fall. And then... Hiram will have his perfect empire."

The voice was silent for a moment, as though processing Polo's revelations. Then it spoke, dark and menacing.

Voice - "How long has this plan been in motion?"

Polo's eyes darted around the room, the final pieces of his courage slipping away. "Years... Hiram's been working on this since he joined. Gathering dirt on everyone, setting up allies that would stay loyal to him alone. And he knows... knows that once he's got everyone questioning the Boss, the loyalty will start to shift."

Voice - "And you? Marco? You've been a part of this all along?"

Polo swallowed hard. "Yes... we did what he asked. We sabotaged shipments, spread rumors, sent those burner phone messages... all to make the Boss look weak, like he's losing control."

Voice - "And did you ever think Hiram would let you keep breathing once this was all done?"

A bitter laugh escaped Polo's lips, though his eyes remained downcast. "No. I knew... I knew he'd probably toss me aside when he didn't need me. But it was better than the alternative. Better than—"

The voice cut him off coldly. "You betrayed the Boss... for a shadow's promise."

Polo remained silent, every trace of defiance now gone. The reality of his choices seemed to press down on him, suffocating and inescapable.

Voice - "Remember this feeling, Polo. Remember it well. Because in the end... you're nothing but another piece in Hiram's game."



The room fell silent, the words hanging heavy in the air, as if marking the finality of Polo's fate.

Voice - "You'll be tossed aside, just like Marco was..."

Polo's eyes widened in sudden panic. "Marco? What... what do you mean?" His voice shook, but anger simmered beneath his fear, rising like a storm ready to break.

A slow creak echoed through the warehouse as a door swung open, spilling light across the dim room. Polo squinted, his breath catching as a tall figure stepped into view. His heart pounded against his ribs as recognition dawned.

Polo - "B-Boss...?"

Ramsey stood there, shadowed and cold, his face unreadable but his eyes hard, like tempered steel. He took a step closer, his gaze locked onto Polo, piercing straight through him. The room seemed to constrict, the air thick with tension.

Ramsey - "I'm sorry, Polo. Your brother... Marco was killed."

The words landed like a blow, but it was Ramsey's next sentence that twisted the knife.

Ramsey - "Killed by Hiram."

Polo's face contorted with shock and then rage, his hands clenched tightly against the chair arms. "No... no, that can't be! Hiram? Hiram killed my brother?"

Ramsey didn't flinch, his voice low but firm. "Yes, Polo. The one you betrayed me for. The one you've been blindly following, doing his

bidding... he turned around and shot Marco without a second thought."

Polo's breathing grew ragged, his body straining against the ropes holding him in place. "That snake! He promised us protection! He said we were doing this for the future of Heartlands—that he'd make sure we both survived!" His voice was breaking, torn between rage and disbelief. "Marco was loyal to him! We did everything he asked!"

Ramsey's eyes narrowed, watching Polo unravel. "And he took that loyalty... and discarded it the second it suited him. You were both just pawns to him."

Polo struggled, fury blazing in his eyes. "If I get out of here, I swear I'll kill him! I'll make him pay for this! Marco was my blood, my only family, and that bastard—" His voice cracked, and his head dropped as the weight of betrayal hit him like a physical blow. "Marco trusted him... we both did."

Ramsey leaned in, his voice cutting through Polo's rage like a blade. "That's what blind loyalty costs, Polo. Hiram manipulated you, used you to tear apart everything I built... and then disposed of Marco like he was nothing. You were never more than tools to him."

Polo's gaze turned dark, his face twisted in agony and anger. "Hiram lied... he lied to us, to me! And he killed my brother, like he was... nothing." He snarled, his anger flaring with a dangerous edge.

Ramsey let the silence settle, watching Polo's anger burn. When he finally spoke, his voice was grim. "Hiram's plans go deeper than you can imagine, Polo. And now... you're at the end of the line. You've lost your brother, your loyalty, and your freedom—all because you put your trust in the wrong person."

Polo's head dropped again, his breathing hard, raw grief mingling with the seething hatred in his eyes. "You... you knew, didn't you? All along... you knew Hiram was up to something. You let him do this."

Ramsey shook his head slowly. "I didn't let him kill Marco. That, Polo, was all on Hiram. But I'm here to make sure his plans don't go any further."

Polo's voice dropped to a snarl, the betrayal too much to bear. "Then let me help you bring him down. I want my revenge—he'll pay for what he did to Marco."

Ramsey stepped closer, his voice low and firm. "I'm sorry, Polo, but we're in too deep here. This situation—it's gone beyond loyalty or grudges. I'm not like Hiram. So I'll give you one truth... just this once."

Polo looked up, his eyes a mix of hatred and pleading.

Ramsey - "I work for the government. I'm a double agent."

The words dropped like a weight, filling the silence. Polo's face twisted in confusion and shock.

Ramsey - "For twenty years, I've been setting this up, step by step, to take down the Heartlands. Everything you see here—the organization you were so willing to betray me for—is on borrowed time. A few more days, and it'll all be gone. Forever."

Polo's mouth hung open, barely able to process what he was hearing. "You... what?"

Ramsey - "And for all the crimes you've committed, for every life you've taken or helped destroy, there won't be freedom on the other side of this. Not for you."

Polo's face hardened, his shock giving way to a fiercer anger, a determination that cut through his grief. "I don't care about any of that," he spat, his voice trembling but resolute. "I just want one thing. To end Hiram. I'll deal with whatever comes after, I'll rot in whatever hell they send me to—but I want him dead, Boss. By my hands."

Ramsey shook his head, his face grim. "This isn't a game, Polo. Hiram's in a position you can't even imagine. You're talking about taking down a man who's embedded himself so deeply into this operation that I'm not sure even I can pull him out."

Polo's fists clenched as he struggled against the ropes, his face contorted with fury. "I don't care how impossible it is! He took my

brother's life like it was nothing! And he used me... all of us, like we were disposable!" His voice broke, but he swallowed hard, pushing past it. "Please, Boss. Let me take him down. I'll do whatever you need—give you whatever information you want—just give me Hiram."

Ramsey held Polo's gaze, his expression a mask of conflict. "And what makes you think I'd trust you now, after everything?"

Polo's eyes burned with desperate resolve. "Because... this isn't just loyalty anymore. This is justice. For Marco, for all the people he's crossed. For all of us he's played."

Without another word, Ramsey released his hand and turned toward the door. Polo followed, and they moved in unison, side by side, their steps heavy with purpose. They were stepping out from the safety of shadows, into a future fraught with danger and uncertain alliances, but bound by a shared goal that left no room for hesitation.

The warehouse door creaked open, casting long shadows ahead of them as they stepped outside. The cold night air hit them, sharp and biting, a stark reminder of the peril awaiting them. Ramsey glanced at Polo, a silent acknowledgment passing between them—whatever lay ahead, they'd face it together.

They stepped forward, into the unknown.

Day 3

In the dim, underground conference room, a long, rectangular table stretched across the center, lined with gang leaders whose names echoed fear and respect throughout Leeds. The air was thick with tension, anticipation, and the weight of promises Hiram had made to each of them. A single overhead light illuminated the scene, casting deep shadows across the faces of these influential figures as they awaited Hiram's word on the elusive supply box that could change everything.

On the far end of the table sat Felix Carrillo, leader of the Iron Serpents, his sharp eyes scanning each face around the room.

Next to him, Marta "The Viper" Delgado of the Black Cobras looked unimpressed, her cold gaze fixated on Hiram.

Samir "Shade" Al-Fayed, leader of the Red Shadows, tapped his fingers on the table with a calculated rhythm.

Beside Samir, Luigi "Big Lu" Ricci of the Steel Knights leaned forward, his massive frame barely contained in his chair.

Across from him, Noah "Cipher" Lee from the Midnight Syndicate kept his hands in his pockets, his sharp, intelligent eyes hidden behind dark glasses.

The Iron Fists' leader, Diego "Bones" Martinez, sat in silence, his steely expression barely masking the frustration boiling beneath.

Finally, Natasha "Raven" Volkov, leader of the Vipers, sat closest to Hiram, her hooded eyes narrowing as she scrutinized him.

As Hiram cleared his throat, all eyes turned to him. "Thank you all for coming," he began, his voice calm, yet resonating with authority. "The supply we're expecting contains everything each of you needs. Advanced technology, corrupt contacts, secure smuggling routes, manpower—everything you've been promised."

Felix Carrillo scoffed, breaking the silence. "Promises are one thing, Hiram. We're here for proof. How do we know this box even exists?"

Hiram smiled, a hint of that hidden darkness flickering in his gaze. "The box will arrive as scheduled, and when it does, you'll each receive the resources I've pledged." He leaned forward. "Including a secure access key to high-tech weaponry and drones that will put your gangs at a tactical advantage no one in Leeds has ever seen."

Marta Delgado shook her head. "High-tech weaponry is great, but I need protection. Half my distribution network has crumbled thanks to new police raids. You promised access to a list of corrupt officials to keep my operations untouched. Where is it?"

Hiram nodded calmly. "The box contains a full list of officials and law enforcement contacts—men on the inside, ready to give you intelligence and immunity. With them in place, the raids will be a thing of the past. You'll have the city's protection, as long as you work with me."

Samir Al-Fayed raised an eyebrow, crossing his arms. "And what about the cyber warfare kit? You said you'd provide surveillance software and hacking devices to keep our rivals in check. We need to know exactly what's in this kit."

Hiram's smile broadened. "Everything you need, Samir. The latest hacking devices, surveillance software—you'll be able to monitor anyone, anywhere. Rival gangs won't even know they're being watched until it's too late. Imagine the power that gives you."

Big Lu leaned forward, his voice a low rumble. "It all sounds real nice, Hiram, but words don't mean squat. I need smuggling routes, secure ones. Without that, my crew has no way to move our assets without getting caught."

Hiram met his gaze without blinking. "The box contains maps, codes, and all the access you need to a hidden network of smuggling routes across the city—and beyond. These routes are invisible to authorities. Safehouses along the way will keep your goods secure, and every operation you run will be under my oversight."

Noah "Cipher" Lee finally spoke, his voice quiet but pointed. "And how do we know you're not selling us lies, Hiram? If we join you, we're putting everything on the line. What's stopping you from using this kit to control us?"

Hiram's expression darkened. "Because I've made each of you powerful promises, and I don't intend to break them. The same tools

that can protect you could destroy you, but that's the risk of power. Trust me, and we all benefit."

Bones Martinez clenched his fists, his gaze hard. "And what about muscle? I need fighters, soldiers ready to move. You promised a recruitment network, Hiram. Where's that?"

Hiram nodded again, unfazed. "In the box is a database of potential recruits—desperate, skilled, ready to be loyal. With them, each of you will be able to rebuild your ranks and keep your operations secure."

Finally, Raven Volkov spoke up, her voice dripping with skepticism. "And this heist plan? You mentioned something about a high-stakes score with offshore funds. Why should we trust you to guide us?"

Hiram leaned back, folding his hands. "Because this plan, and the funds tied to it, offer the chance to secure your futures beyond Leeds. This score will set us up for life, if you follow my lead."

A murmur passed through the room as the leaders exchanged glances, each calculating their next move, weighing Hiram's promises against their own ambitions.

Felix looked directly at Hiram. "One box. One shipment, and all this falls into place?" His tone was equal parts disbelief and cautious hope.

Hiram met each leader's gaze with confidence. "Yes, one box. And when it arrives, each of you will have what you need to reshape this city."

The room went quiet, each leader processing the weight of Hiram's words, the magnitude of what he promised. The stakes couldn't be higher; for each of them, this single shipment meant survival, power, revenge, and fortune. And as they sat in silence, one thought permeated the room: once that box arrived, nothing in Leeds would ever be the same.

As Hiram explained the details, a wave of skepticism washed over the room. The leaders shifted in their seats, exchanging wary glances, before Felix Carrillo spoke up, his tone edged with doubt.

"One box, Hiram? You're telling us that a single shipment holds every bit of firepower, intel, and protection we need?" Felix's voice carried the frustration shared around the table.

Marta "The Viper" Delgado leaned in, her brow furrowed. "I find it hard to believe that one delivery can offer us a tech arsenal, immunity from the cops, smuggling routes, manpower—all in one go. Where's this magic supply coming from?"

Hiram held up a hand to silence the doubts swirling around him. "We have a unique supplier. For the last twenty years, he's supplied us monthly, never missing a delivery and always giving us exactly what we need. His identity is unknown, even to me, but he's been reliable beyond question. We pay him a year's worth in advance,

and he supplies us with equipment, tools, and resources tailored to our needs—no questions asked."

Noah "Cipher" Lee raised an eyebrow, suspicion clear in his voice. "So this ghost supplier just knows what we need, huh? And we've never had a reason to complain?"

Hiram nodded. "He's never failed us. Each month, we receive the essentials, and every shipment's contents are perfect for our operations. If we want something specific, though—something beyond his standard supplies—we have to pay a much larger sum."

Diego "Bones" Martinez folded his arms, scowling. "And how much are we talking for these 'special requests'?"

Hiram paused, letting the room's silence build before he answered. "Half a million pounds."

The table erupted. Felix's chair scraped back as he half stood, his face a mix of shock and anger. "Five hundred thousand pounds? You expect us to cough up that kind of money for something custom?"

Marta sneered, crossing her arms. "That's robbery, Hiram! How do we know this is even real, that this supplier isn't just some legend you cooked up to keep us under control?"

Big Lu grunted, shaking his head in disbelief. "A hundred thousand each month's one thing, but half a million just for one request? What

guarantee do we have that this supplier can be trusted with that kind of cash?"

Hiram remained unfazed, his voice steady. "Look, I understand your doubts. But this isn't some fairy tale. This supplier has kept Heartlands at the top for decades. You all came to me because you've seen how Heartlands has resources that no one else in this city does. That's not luck—it's his work."

Raven Volkov gave Hiram a sharp look. "So what happens if this box doesn't make it? Or if we don't get what we paid for?"

Hiram leaned in, his gaze darkening. "If this shipment fails, everything we've built together crumbles. Heartlands, our alliances, all of it. But if it succeeds, you'll each get what you need to take this city, with no rival strong enough to stand against you."

The silence that followed was thick with tension as the gang leaders absorbed Hiram's words. They were faced with a choice—believe in this supplier's near-mythical reputation, or risk losing everything they'd fought to gain.

The leaders settled around the large table, eying each other with the familiar tension that marked their usual meetings. Hiram stood at the head of the room, his expression cool and calculated, his hands resting confidently on the table's edge. As he laid out the plan and described the imminent arrival of the highly anticipated supply box, the leaders exchanged skeptical glances.



Felix Carrillo leaned back in his chair, arms crossed. "You've got our attention, Hiram, but you've yet to explain what's inside this all-powerful box. Just what are we supposed to be buying into here?"

"Yeah it sounds like a fairy tale," Marta Delgado muttered, leaning forward, arms braced against the table. "We're supposed to believe that one box holds enough power to give us an edge against every rival in the city?"

Samir "Shade" Al-Fayed shook his head, skepticism etched across his face. "Hiram, we've been doing this long enough to know that no supplier would hand over so much to any single buyer. There has to be a catch."

"Or maybe he's just bluffing," Diego "Bones" Martinez added, eyeing Hiram with a hard gaze. "What's really in there, Hiram? What's the piece that'll somehow give us all the leverage you're promising?"

Hiram held his ground, his gaze never wavering as he looked from one leader to the next. "You're all asking the right question. What's so special about this box? It's not just the contents—it's the access it grants us."

There was a pause, and then Big Lu broke the silence with a scoff. "Access? What kind of access?"

"A bug," Hiram said simply.

The room fell silent. A collective murmur broke out as the leaders glanced at each other in confusion.

"A bug?" Raven sneered, arching an eyebrow. "That's your master plan?"

The others murmured their agreement, suspicion flickering in their eyes. Marta Delgado leaned forward, her fingers drumming sharply against the table. "So we pay a fortune, and in return, we're hoping some gadget?."

Hiram's eyes glinted as he held up a calming hand. "You're not getting it, Marta. This isn't just a random gadget. It's a specific access key and we can reverse engineer it, design it to open his most secure files. Unbeknownst to him, — there is a bug hidden

deep in its code." He let his gaze sweep the room, letting his words sink in. "When he switches on his system after that, it'll reveal his exact location, his network, his entire operation."

The gang leaders exchanged glances, their skepticism slowly giving way to intrigue. Diego "Bones" Martinez raised an eyebrow. "So... we're not just paying for supplies. We're paying to own this guy's empire?"

Hiram nodded, a thin smile crossing his face. "Exactly. Imagine it: every weapon, every resource, every safehouse and smuggling route—ours to control. No more waiting, no more overpriced favors. Anything you need will be at your fingertips."

The air grew charged with anticipation as the others leaned in, each one picturing the advantages Hiram was laying out. But Natasha "Raven" Volkov wasn't satisfied yet. "And what's to stop him from finding out? If he's as careful as you say, he might catch onto the bug before it does anything."

"By the time he notices anything unusual, it'll be too late," Hiram said confidently. "We've timed it perfectly. The bug's activation will be delayed, giving us a window to track him without him knowing he's been compromised. Once we've got him, he'll have no choice but to comply—or we'll wipe him out and take everything."

Noah "Cipher" Lee folded his arms, giving a slow nod. "So we're finally talking about control on our terms."

Hiram leaned back, watching the gleam of understanding dawn in their eyes. "That's right, Cipher. No more middlemen, no more unknowns. We'll be the ones dictating terms. But for that to happen, we need to act now. If we can gather the funds tonight, we pay him, and by tomorrow evening, that shipment will be here—and with it, his future in our hands."

Big Lu shook his head, but this time, there was a sly grin on his face. "I gotta admit, Hiram, you've outdone yourself. We've been waiting for something like this."

There was a ripple of agreement, and one by one, the leaders nodded, the skepticism replaced by excitement, greed, and the thrill of power. Felix reached into his jacket, pulling out his wallet. "Well, if this is the price to finally be the ones on top—count me in."

Marta Delgado rolled her eyes but slid a bank card across the table. "I'm in. But you better make good on your word, Hiram."

One by one, the others did the same, pulling out cash, cards, and payment details, stacking them in a growing pile in the center of the table. The weight of their decision filled the room, a silent agreement solidifying.

As Hiram gathered the payments, he looked at each leader in turn, his face a mask of steely determination. "Gentlemen—and lady—we're on the verge of something bigger than any one of us has ever known. Tomorrow, everything changes. For each of you, for me, and for this city."

Hiram leaned back, exuding confidence as he scanned the room. "This calls for a celebration," he announced, raising his empty glass. "Heh, too bad the wine has ended." He rose from his seat, walking to the door with an easy stride. Opening it, he called the maid back in, a small smirk playing on his lips. "Bring another bottle, would you?"

The maid entered, her face neutral, her gaze carefully lowered. She placed a fresh bottle of wine on the table, skillfully balancing the now-empty tray. With a polite nod, she collected the used glasses, making quick work of clearing away the remnants of their first toast.

As she turned to leave, she heard the chorus behind her—glasses clinking, voices filled with exhilaration and ambition. "To the future!" they echoed, a note of triumph in their voices. But as she stepped outside, the faintest hint of a smile crept onto her lips.

She slowed her pace as she neared a corner, ensuring no one was watching. Then, from beneath the tray, she retrieved a small coin-like object—the bug she'd placed there earlier, before even the conversation began, to eavesdrop on their every word. Tiffany, with every ounce of the maid's disguise gone, pocketed the device.

Now, she held every piece of Hiram's plan in her grasp—his ambitions, his allies, and, most importantly, his vulnerability.

Her quiet footsteps faded into the hall as the realization settled over her. She had what Ramsey, Cheng, and now Polo would need to unravel Hiram's empire from the inside out.

Tomorrow, they'd be one step ahead of him.

Day 4

The warehouse was dim, with only a few shafts of light slicing through cracked windows high above. Dust floated in the air, illuminated by a single hanging bulb that swung gently, casting fleeting shadows over the four figures clustered near a stack of crates.

Ramsey stood at the center, arms folded, his gaze sharp and calculating as he scanned the team before him. Polo leaned casually against a metal pillar, massive arms crossed over his chest, his expression stony but attentive. Lt. Cheng stood nearby, his posture straight, movements precise, as if constantly ready for action. Tiffany, slightly removed from the group, adjusted her cap, her eyes glinting with the trace of a plan yet to unfold.

Ramsey turned to the nearby computer, his fingers dancing across the keys as he accessed a secure network. With a quick flick of his wrist, he spun around in his chair, facing the three waiting figures.

"Alright, team," he began, "the plan's shifted slightly. The shipment will arrive at midnight instead of this evening."



Lt. Cheng frowned, his eyes narrowing. "How do you know?"

Ramsey gave a slight smirk. "The supplier always sends the mob an update before the final handoff. I tapped into their line." His gaze shifted to Tiffany. "You're up first. I want you there now, ahead of the rest. Get into the disguise of a dockworker and keep a low profile. Hiram's likely added extra security, and I don't want any surprises."

Tiffany nodded, already calculating her approach. "Understood. I'll scout and locate the crate. Once I confirm its position, I'll signal Cheng for the next step."

Ramsey looked at Cheng, who was watching him intently. "Cheng, you'll be on standby. The moment Tiffany confirms, you'll move in."

Your primary objective is the access card. Keep it clean and precise—grab it, then get out."

Cheng gave a quick nod, his demeanor calm and controlled. "Got it, Boss."

Turning to Polo, sitting on a chair using the computer, Ramsey continued, "And Polo—you're our backup. Stay close but out of sight, just in case things go south. If anyone runs into trouble, you'll be the muscle to get them out. Make sure you keep an eye on the entry points; if anyone's snooping around, take care of them."

Polo cracked his knuckles, his smile a dangerous promise. "Understood, Boss. I'll make sure no one gets in the way."

Ramsey nodded, feeling the team's determination settle into place. "Let's cover the specifics. Tiffany, find the crate's exact location and keep an eye on the guards' shifts or rotations. You'll need to time it right for Cheng's approach. Cheng, the minute you have that card, move back to the extraction point, where Polo will cover your exit if needed."

Tiffany's voice cut through, level and confident. "And if it's a setup?"

"Good question." Ramsey's expression hardened. "If it's a setup or something goes off-script, disable the shipment however you can. Cause a distraction, sabotage the equipment—anything that gives us more time to regroup and recalibrate. Our priority is to secure

that access card, but if things go wrong, we make sure Hiram doesn't get his shipment either."

Cheng and Tiffany exchanged a quick glance, acknowledging the gravity of the task. Polo tapped the side of his shoe, signaling he was ready to move out on Ramsey's word.

Ramsey took a deep breath. "Remember, Hiram has no idea that we're about to intercept his lifeline. This access card is our way into his supplier's entire operation—one wrong move, and we're back at square one. Stick to the plan, stay sharp, and keep comms open."

Tiffany adjusted her jacket, her voice steady. "Understood, Ramsey. We are on it."

As the group prepared to head out, Polo looked back at Ramsey, a hint of curiosity in his expression. "And you, Boss? What are you gonna be doing?"

Ramsey gave a slight smirk, spinning the chair back toward the computer screen. "Me? I'll be staying at the mob house. Can't risk anyone getting suspicious of me, can we?"

Tiffany and Cheng nodded, understanding the need for subtlety, and they made their way out of the safehouse, leaving Ramsey and Polo behind.

Just as Polo was about to follow, Ramsey spoke up, his tone calm but laced with an undercurrent of authority. "Polo... stay here for a bit, will you?"

Polo froze, glancing toward the door where Tiffany and Cheng had just exited, then back at Ramsey. "Okay."

The door closed with a quiet finality, leaving just the two of them in the room, shadows dancing under the dim light. Ramsey observed Polo with an unreadable expression, his fingers drumming lightly on the arm of the chair, sizing him up as though he were trying to see beneath the surface.

Polo shifted under Ramsey's gaze, feeling the tension between them, almost as if Ramsey was peeling back layers he'd long kept hidden.

Ramsey's eyes lingered on Polo, watching as the others left the safehouse. When the door clicked shut, an almost tangible silence filled the room. Ramsey leaned back, his gaze cold and calculating as he regarded Polo, who shifted uneasily under the weight of it.

Polo broke the silence first, a trace of suspicion in his voice. "You still don't trust me, do you, Boss? That's why you kept me out of the main job. Just a backup, just in case."

Ramsey allowed a slight smirk to slip, his voice calm but laced with a quiet edge. "I'm a very calculating man, Polo. But then again, you already know that, don't you?"

Polo looked down, nodding, his face shadowed in the dim light.
"Yeah... I know."

A silence stretched between them, weighted with things unsaid. Ramsey leaned forward, his fingers steepled, his tone pointed and direct. "For all the years you've been with us, it's Marco who always took the front lines, leading the charge. Meanwhile, you held back, quietly assisting from the sidelines. Almost as if... as if you were waiting for something."

Polo looked away, the muscles in his jaw clenching. "That's true. I've never been much of a fighter, Boss."

Ramsey's gaze didn't falter. "Not much of a fighter? Or simply choosing not to be?"

Polo's shoulders slumped slightly, and he exhaled, his voice a murmur. "Before I joined the Heartlands... my brother and I were part of a dying martial arts school. My grandfather's school, one he poured his life into. It was the only thing we had left of him. So, yeah, I know how to fight. But fighting wasn't the way I wanted to remember him."

Ramsey's expression softened just a fraction, understanding dawning in his eyes. But his voice remained sharp, almost probing. "Yet you came to the mob anyway."

Polo's gaze hardened, and for the first time, there was a glint of defiance. "It was the only way to save the school, Boss. The school

was going under. Marco and I had no other way to keep it going. Joining the mob... well, it was survival. It was a way to keep something of our family's legacy alive."

Ramsey let the silence hang, considering Polo's words with a new intensity. It was a twisted irony—one that echoed with his own reasons for joining Heartlands years ago. Ramsey looked Polo over, measuring him, and finally spoke, his voice low, almost conspiratorial.

"We've all got something we're fighting for, Polo. But one day, we have to decide what we're willing to lose to keep it."

Polo looked up, a trace of wariness and gratitude flickering in his eyes. There was an unspoken understanding between them now—a hint of respect. Ramsey gave him a final nod, a wordless dismissal.

Polo took a step toward the door, but before he left, he paused, glancing back. "I'm not Marco, Boss. But if the time comes, I won't be standing on the sidelines."

With that, Polo disappeared into the night, leaving Ramsey alone in the silence of the safehouse.

Ramsey's words hung in the air, a blend of reassurance and mystery that Polo hadn't expected. "Which is why, regardless of everything, I still felt that kindness in you," Ramsey said, his voice low and thoughtful. "Because deep down... I've always known you to be a good person."

Polo blinked, caught off guard by the admission. "Boss... I don't know what to say. Thank you."

Ramsey gave him a nod, a rare softness flickering in his usually calculating gaze. "Which is why you're the anomaly in my operation, Polo. A wildcard we desperately need."

They moved in silence down the narrow, dimly lit corridor, the sound of their footsteps echoing off the cold concrete. Shadows stretched along the walls, their forms blending and separating with each step, as though the darkness itself was listening in on their conversation.

Finally, they stopped before a large, unmarked metal door at the far end of the warehouse. The air seemed to grow heavier as Ramsey reached for the keypad beside the door, his hand hovering there for a moment longer than necessary. Polo watched, feeling his own pulse quicken.



"This," Ramsey murmured, his gaze fixed on the keypad, "this is probably the most uncalculated and the most random thing I'm doing right now, but..." He punched in a code, the keypad beeping softly in response.

The door unlocked with a click, the weight of it almost palpable as it swung open, revealing a dimly lit room beyond. Ramsey's voice was barely more than a whisper. "But this... this is just..."

Ramsey's voice was barely more than a whisper as he stepped aside, allowing Polo a full view. "Just... what we might need... right now."

The Docks

The clock struck 11:45 p.m., and the dockyard bustled with activity. Workers moved like shadows, carrying crates, guiding forklifts, voices blending with the constant hum of machinery. In the middle of it all, one figure kept her head low, her petite frame dwarfed by the other workers but moving with purpose and precision. Tiffany adjusted her cap, tugging it down a little further over her face, her lips pressing together in a thoughtful frown.

She lifted a smaller crate, not too heavy, and pretended to be catching her breath as she stole a quick glance around. The misty night air felt colder, her nerves rising as she took in the endless rows of shipping containers stacked like towering walls around her.

"I've been everywhere...", she whispered softly, her voice barely a murmur, "and it's just...not here. Oh, what am I supposed to do?"



She shifted on her feet, the urgency building inside her. She'd been checking each section carefully, hoping to spot that one shipment, but it seemed to be missing. She peeked at her watch again, feeling the weight of each ticking second. The longer she lingered, the greater the risk of being spotted as a stranger among the regular dockworkers.

"Come on, Tiffany, think." She hugged her arms around herself, almost as if for comfort, staring into the dark maze of containers. "Ramsey's counting on me." A small sigh escaped her lips, edged with a hint of frustration, though she quickly reminded herself to keep calm.

Forcing herself to keep moving, she let out a determined breath, speaking under her breath with the tiniest smile for encouragement. "All right, let's try one more round—this time with a little luck."

Tiffany froze, clutching her chest as she spun around, eyes wide. A dockworker behind her grinned with a knowing nod, tipping his hat and moving along without a second glance. She let out a soft breath, feeling her cheeks flush slightly as she relaxed, her heart still racing.

Just then, Ramsey's voice crackled through her earpiece, low and calm. "Careful, Tiffany. Might not want to draw too much attention."

She huffed quietly, rolling her eyes with a soft pout as she muttered, "Ramsey, you...you nearly gave me a heart attack!"

His chuckle was warm but unapologetic. "Really sorry, but I couldn't resist. So, how's it going?"

Tiffany's face fell back into that worried look, glancing around at the endless maze of containers. "It's...it's just too different. They've hidden it so well, I don't even have a clue where to start. I've looked everywhere, but it's nowhere in sight."

"That's our supplier," Ramsey said with a note of approval, his tone steady. "He doesn't make things easy to find. You won't spot it until the timing's right."

She bit her lip, glancing at her watch again. Midnight felt like a lifetime away. "So, what do I do? I don't want to just stand around..."

"Wait till midnight," Ramsey's voice came through, calm as ever. "Once Cheng's in position, we'll have what we need. Until then, keep blending in. You've got this."

Tiffany took a deep breath, giving a small, determined nod. "All right, Ramsey. I'll stay put."

Up on the docked crate, a shadowy figure landed with practiced grace, the sleek lines of her black stealth suit blending seamlessly into the dim, moonlit surroundings. It was Lt. Cheng, she straightened, her gaze sharp and assessing as she surveyed the dockyard below, noting every movement, every flicker of light in the distance.



She tapped her earpiece. "Almost time, Ramsey. Is everything set up?"

Ramsey's voice came through the comms, steady and calm. "Yes, all that's left is for the clock to strike—"

Before he could finish, the faint, metallic ringing of the old dockyard clock began to echo across the night, marking midnight with a resonant chime that cut through the silence.

Ramsey's tone held a hint of satisfaction. "There it is."

Cheng nodded to herself, her gloved fingers flexing as she prepared to move. This was the signal they'd been waiting for, the final green light. Pressing her back against the crate, she sank deeper into the

shadows, a calm focus settling over her as she calculated her next steps.

Then, as if summoned from the depths, a large black crate emerged slowly from beneath the water, its dark surface gleaming ominously under the scattered dock lights. The crane above creaked to life, lowering its cables with practiced precision, then latching onto the crate. It began to lift the mysterious cargo, inching upward in a deliberate, almost ceremonial fashion, every movement echoing eerily in the quiet night air.

Lt. Cheng's eyes narrowed as she tracked its ascent, catching sight of several armed guards now patrolling the area below. The number of security personnel had doubled since she last checked, each one alert and scanning for the slightest disturbance. She pressed a finger to her earpiece. "Ramsey... looks like they've amped up security. It's tighter than expected."

Ramsey's voice came through with a calm steadiness. "Stay low, Cheng. Let them move it into position. Tiffany will give you the location once they're clear."

Cheng exhaled slowly, settling deeper into her cover. She glanced across the dockyard, spotting Tiffany in her dockworker disguise near a stack of pallets, her face an image of forced composure as she kept her head down, moving carefully between crates, but still not able to hide a slight look of worry.

The crane's slow, deliberate path through the air only heightened the tension, and as the ominous crate approached its destination, Cheng and Tiffany both waited, every muscle taut, ready for whatever came next.

Lt. Cheng stayed hidden in the shadows above, her gaze methodically sweeping over the entire dockyard as she noted every guard's position. Her training as a combat specialist had taught her the importance of patience—waiting for the perfect moment to strike, while calculating every possible threat in her path. Ramsey's voice crackled quietly in her earpiece.

"Cheng, give me an update. What are we looking at?"

Cheng responded, keeping her tone low. "They've increased their numbers. I count... twelve guards, two near the main crane, three at the central entrance, and the rest on rotating patrols around the perimeter."

Tiffany, down below, clutched her clipboard tightly and moved slowly along her assigned route, stealing glances at each guard as they walked past. Her voice chimed in over the comms, soft but laced with worry. "The guards don't seem local, Ramsey. They're... different. Looks like they've brought in private security for this. They're not Heartlands."

Ramsey's voice remained steady. "Noted. Cheng, any signs of communication devices on them?"

She studied the guards, catching the subtle glint of earpieces on a few of them. "At least half of them are connected. Could be keeping in touch with someone off-site or running a direct link with a control team."

Ramsey processed this for a moment. "Alright, then. First priority: identify the leader. Watch for who gives the orders, even subtly. Cheng, you stay on high ground. Tiffany, keep close but don't engage. Just observe."

Tiffany took a deep breath, calming herself, her fingers fidgeting with the edge of her cap. "Alright, boss. I'll... I'll keep moving. They won't even know I'm here."

With that, she strolled closer to the guards, feigning interest in a clipboard that detailed nothing more than meaningless inventory numbers. She made her way past a small cluster of guards stationed at the southern gate, carefully eavesdropping as they muttered in low tones.

A gruff voice reached her ears. "All shifts are in place. No one goes near the black crate until we get the signal from upstairs. Understand?" The man speaking was tall and imposing, his jaw set with an intensity that screamed authority. Tiffany noted the way the others subtly deferred to him, responding with quiet nods and quick, "Yes, sirs."

She whispered into her comm, "Ramsey, I think I found the lead. Big guy near the south gate. He's giving orders to the others."

Ramsey's voice was approving. "Good work, Tiffany. Cheng, focus on him. See if he breaks off from the group or if he has any other distinct patterns."

From her vantage point, Cheng zeroed in on the man Tiffany had identified. She watched as he walked away from his team, pacing by himself as if mentally going over the operation. He carried himself with a hardened confidence, his gaze sharp as he scanned his surroundings. "Got eyes on him, Ramsey. He's moving alone, pacing. Definitely the type to keep watch over everyone else's work."

Ramsey's voice came through, measured and calm. "Alright. We'll want to neutralize him last. If he's their primary overseer, he'll be the one coordinating any backup response. Tiffany, your job now is to stay close to that crate. Once they position it, I want you ready to mark it and confirm location for extraction."

Tiffany nodded, making her way toward the dockside as the crane lowered the ominous black crate down onto the dock. She could feel her pulse quicken as she edged closer, mentally noting the nearest exits and keeping her movements casual.

Meanwhile, Cheng began her methodical analysis of each guard's patterns. "Ramsey, I've mapped their routes. There's a five-second window at the northwest corner where they're blind on every rotation. If we're going to intercept any communications or try to disrupt their setup, that's our chance."

Ramsey's voice held a note of approval. "Good eye, Cheng. Stay ready. Tiffany, we'll give you the signal to move once we've confirmed that blind spot is clear."

Tiffany murmured a soft affirmation, her eyes never leaving the crate as she mentally rehearsed her role, her fingers brushing the transmitter tucked in her pocket.

Lt. Cheng crouched on the rooftop, her eyes trained on the guards below as they moved through the docks with a rigid pattern, unaware of the silent storm above them. Ramsey's voice came through her earpiece, low and steady.

"Cheng, target at your nine o'clock. He's isolated from the others. Take him first."

A faint smile flickered across her face as she glided along the steel beams, her body melding into the shadows. She dropped down, landing without a sound, her movements quick and calculated. In one swift motion, she grabbed the guard, a gloved hand covering his mouth as she applied pressure to the side of his neck. Within seconds, his body went limp, and she eased him silently to the ground.

"First one down," she whispered.

Ramsey's voice came back, cool as ever. "Good. Now the pair near the crane—approach from their blind spot and keep them quiet."

Cheng moved fluidly across the warehouse beams, her steps precise and calculated. She dropped down behind the two guards by the crane, who were engrossed in a quiet conversation. Cheng's movements were a blur as she hooked her arm around one guard's neck, pressing his head forward while simultaneously delivering a hard, pinpoint strike to the other guard's solar plexus. Both went down without a sound, crumpling into the shadows.

"Three down," she whispered, checking her surroundings.

"Perfect, Cheng," Ramsey's voice encouraged her. "Six o'clock—two more, by the loading bay."

She darted across the crates, the muted fabric of her suit absorbing every sound. She positioned herself just behind them, her shadow merging with the crates as she waited for the perfect moment. The guards turned, oblivious, and she struck. A quick chop to the first guard's throat and a knee to the second one's abdomen took them both out efficiently.

"Five down," Cheng reported, her tone almost cheerful.

Ramsey's voice had a faint hint of satisfaction. "Now the south gate. We'll need to be precise with these ones. You have three guards there—don't let any of them alert the others."

Cheng moved swiftly but carefully, hugging the walls as she neared the south gate. The three guards were clustered close together, one slightly apart as if to cover a wider area. Cheng took a moment,

gauging their positions, and then acted. She threw a small pebble to the far end of the gate, diverting one guard's attention, and then moved in on the other two. She struck one with a powerful chop to the neck while twisting to use his body as a shield against the other. The third guard, now distracted by the noise, barely had time to react before Cheng's elbow connected with his temple.

"South gate is clear," she reported, her breathing still calm and controlled.

Ramsey's voice came through again, steady and composed. "Good. Now for the last two near the main entrance. This has to be seamless."

Cheng moved like a shadow, her footsteps soundless as she neared the main entrance. The last two guards were scanning the area, their backs to her. With fluid grace, she crept closer, using every bit of cover she could find. She slipped behind them, delivering a swift jab to the first guard's side while pinning the other's arm in a brutal hold, rendering both of them silent within seconds.

"All guards neutralized," she murmured.

There was a pause, and then Ramsey's voice came through, the faintest hint of pride in his tone. "Excellent work, Cheng. Now return to position and await the next phase. We're just getting started."

Just as she turned to leave, a faint creak sounded from behind her. She tensed, spinning around to see a figure step out from the

shadows. It was the guards' leader—a tall, broad-shouldered man with a cold, calculating look in his eye. He had a knife in one hand, glinting under the dim dock lights, and his stance radiated confidence.

"So," he sneered, his voice low. "Thought you'd slip through without anyone noticing?"

Cheng's eyes narrowed, her body coiled and ready. "If you're here to get in my way, I'd rethink that."

He lunged forward, knife flashing, but Cheng sidestepped with ease, her movements fluid. She deflected his arm, using his momentum against him, and delivered a sharp elbow strike to his side. He grunted, staggering back but not defeated. With a fierce determination, he closed the distance again, swinging the knife in a calculated arc. Cheng ducked, pivoting to the side, and struck back with a lightning-fast kick to his knee.

The leader snarled, pain flashing across his face as he stumbled. Cheng seized the moment, twisting his knife arm with expert precision, forcing him to release his grip on the blade. In one swift motion, she disarmed him and drove her fist into his jaw, sending him sprawling onto the ground.

He tried to rise, but she placed a foot on his chest, pinning him down. "Stay down," she said, her voice cold. "Or the next time, you won't get back up."

She watched his eyes widen, the fight draining from his face as he realized he was outmatched. After a moment, she stepped back, letting him crumple against the ground.

"Leader neutralized," Cheng reported into her earpiece, her tone calm as ever.

Ramsey's voice crackled in her ear. "Good. Tiffany, it's your turn."

The guards were down. Cheng had done her job, but Tiffany still had one last hurdle to clear. She was close now, but something felt off. She didn't want to risk drawing attention. The last thing they needed was a misplaced move that would bring unwanted eyes.

"Ramsey, there's still a lot of security around here. I don't know if I can get that crate without anyone noticing," Tiffany whispered, her voice tight with anxiety.

"Stay focused, Tiffany," Ramsey's voice came through, calm but firm. "You've trained for this. Cheng's given you the opening. It's time to move."

Tiffany swallowed her fear and nodded to herself. She adjusted her cap, took a deep breath, and began to make her way toward the crate. Every step felt heavier than the last, but she had no choice now. The operation had to succeed.

Cheng remained in the shadows, watching from above, her posture tense as she kept her eyes on the area. The noise of the cranes, the

distant murmurs of the remaining dock workers, the constant shifting of metal—everything seemed to fade away, and it was just the crate. That black crate. The prize.

"Stay alert, both of you," Ramsey's voice came through again, breaking the silence. "We can't afford any mistakes now."

As Tiffany approached, she kept her movements slow and deliberate. Her heart was in her throat. She could see the shadows of the guards' bodies, sprawled out, the evidence of the fight that had just taken place. None of the other workers seemed to notice, absorbed in their tasks. She slipped past them, a ghost in the night.

She reached the crate, her fingers brushing against the cold metal. It was here. It was finally here. Her stomach turned with both fear and excitement.

A soft beep sounded in her earpiece. Ramsey's voice, low and reassuring: "All clear, Tiffany. Bring it in."

With a swift motion, Tiffany accessed the crate's locking mechanism. She had no idea what was inside, but the anticipation was suffocating. Her hands worked faster now, the lock clicking open. Slowly, she pushed the crate open, revealing the contents hidden inside—contents that would change everything.

She paused, taking a deep breath. The moment had arrived.

"Ramsey, it's here," she said, her voice steady but carrying a note of uncertainty. "I've got it. But you might want to see this for yourself."

She turned to Cheng, who had already moved to her position, a shadow slipping through the darkness.

"Good," Cheng replied, her voice cold but calm. "Let's get out of here."

They moved in perfect sync, their footsteps soft and calculated as they retraced their steps, careful to avoid detection. The stillness of the dock was almost suffocating, but the quiet gave them an advantage. Every second, every inch closer to their exit felt like an eternity.

Ramsey's voice came through the comms, his tone still eerily calm despite the tension. "You're almost there. Polo's waiting at the gate. Just get through it clean, and we're done."

Tiffany's heart raced, her eyes scanning the surroundings as she continued forward. Cheng was already a few steps ahead, moving like she was born to this kind of work—silent, deadly, and precise. Tiffany admired her for a moment before refocusing.

As they approached the exit, a metallic clang echoed in the distance, faint but distinct. It made Tiffany freeze for a moment, her blood running cold.

"Everything okay?" Ramsey's voice cut through the air, sharp and filled with concern.

"I—I heard something," Tiffany muttered, her eyes darting back toward the docks. "Stay alert."

Cheng held up a hand, signaling for Tiffany to stop. The two of them crouched low, hiding behind the cover of some crates as the sounds grew louder. The familiar hum of engines. Tires screeching against the asphalt. Someone was coming.

Then, a flash of headlights cut through the darkness.

The hairs on the back of Tiffany's neck stood up. She could hear the engines roaring as the cars came into view, their headlights cutting through the fog. At least five cars—SUVs, sedans, muscle cars—pulled up at the gate. The tires screeched as they stopped abruptly, one after another. The gates were just a few yards away, but they were about to be blocked.

"No... no, no, no," Tiffany muttered under her breath. "This can't be happening."

The silence in Tiffany's ear was like ice, Ramsey's voice lost in the static. She gritted her teeth, resisting the urge to smash the comms against the nearest crate. For a second, she felt exposed, vulnerable, as if the air itself had turned on her.

"Damnit," she muttered, eyes scanning the shadows around them. The gang members were closing in, their voices slicing through the stillness with barks and curses. The men moved with purpose, dark silhouettes against the lights, each one armed and deadly serious. They'd spotted her and Cheng, and now they were zeroing in like wolves on the scent.

Cheng's eyes narrowed, her lips tightening as she reached for her sidearm. She gave Tiffany a swift nod, the message clear: we don't back down. The light from the car beams flickered across their faces, momentarily blinding them, then plunging them back into shadow. Every sense felt heightened, the tension like a live wire. Tiffany could hear her pulse thundering in her ears, her hand itching to draw her own weapon.

The air was thick with the stench of gasoline and saltwater, every breath filling her lungs with a mixture of fear and defiance. Each step forward by the gang members felt like a challenge, and with every inch they lost, Tiffany felt the grip of time tightening around her, seconds ticking down.

Their cover was slipping away, and as the headlights wavered, the shadows stretched, their enemies' forms growing more distinct. The shouts grew louder, each one piercing the darkness like a warning.

Just then Tiffany caught a glint of metal arcing through the air. Before she could react, Cheng moved like lightning, her hand

shoving Tiffany down to the ground. They hit the asphalt just as the world erupted around them.

A powerful blast echoed across the docks, followed by an expanding wave of smoke that swallowed everything in sight. Tiffany's ears rang as she tried to get her bearings, her vision blurred by the thick haze. Before she could comprehend what was happening, a second explosion followed—a flashbang. Blinding light tore through the darkness, and she heard the collective screams of the allied gang members as they staggered back, clutching their eyes and stumbling over one another.

In the chaos, someone leaped into the fog, moving like a shadow slipping between the flashes of light. Tiffany squinted, just barely able to make out a figure, dressed in a sleek, dark suit she hadn't seen in years. It was a silhouette from the past, one she thought had been buried long ago. The lines were sharp, the fabric tailored, and yet, there was a raw power in the way the man moved, each step falling like a calculated blow.



"Cheng," Tiffany whispered, trying to process the scene before her.
"What is that?"

Cheng's gaze was locked on the man as he tore through the line of allied members with a ferocity that left even her stunned. She didn't answer, just kept her eyes on him, watching every strike with a rare intensity. He moved with a purpose that was terrifying to witness—one strike, one step, one enemy down. His fists flew with precision, each blow landing with a brutal finality.

The gang members scrambled, trying to find their footing amidst the smoke, but the man anticipated every move. One swung blindly, and he sidestepped with ease, bringing his elbow down on the attacker's neck, dropping him to the ground. Another charged at him with a knife, and in a single fluid motion, he disarmed the man,

twisting his arm back before driving a knee into his ribs. A sharp cry echoed as the man fell, and the figure disappeared back into the smoke, only to reappear again on another side, disorienting the others.

"Who... who is this guy?" Tiffany muttered, more to herself than anyone else.

"He's a ghost," Cheng replied, almost in awe, her voice tinged with something Tiffany had never heard before. Respect? Fear? "No one was supposed to wear that suit again. Not after... not after what happened a year ago."

"Cheng!" Tiffany snapped, her voice shaking as she tried to focus. "Is this... Is this a part of the plan? Did Ramsey send him?"

Cheng didn't answer, her gaze fixed on the mysterious figure as he continued to dismantle the remaining guards. Another gang member lunged at him from behind, but the man shifted without hesitation, twisting around to land a crushing blow to the attacker's jaw, sending him sprawling. The speed, the precision—it was too calculated, too practiced. He was a professional, someone trained in ways that went far beyond street brawls.

The allied members' panic was growing. Shouts of

"Get him!"

"Where is he?!"

Rang out, but the smoke and the man's ruthless efficiency had thrown them into disarray. One by one, they fell, until only a handful were left standing.

A high-pitched scream split the air as one gang member stumbled backward, clutching his arm as the man delivered a swift kick, knocking him out cold. Another ally tried to make a break for it, but the man was faster, intercepting him with a single, deadly punch to the solar plexus that left him gasping on the ground.

The silence settled like a weight over the dock, the last remnants of smoke swirling around the man as he straightened, his eyes glinting under the faint glow of the remaining headlights.

Cheng then nodded, her face drawn with an emotion Tiffany couldn't quite read. "The man who almost destroyed everything Ramsey had built. Single-handedly."

The words made Tiffany's stomach tighten. "No... it can't be..."

Before she could say more, a shadow moved through the smoke, slipping among the gang members. There was something unmistakably deliberate about the figure's movements, like a predator hunting prey. He wore a sleek, pitch-black tactical suit, moving with deadly precision, his steps silent but purposeful.

One of the allied gang members spotted him and screamed, "There! Over there!"

The man turned toward the voice, his movements calm, controlled. In one swift motion, he closed the distance and struck, his fist driving into the gang member's chest, then pulling him to the ground with ruthless efficiency. Another attacker lunged forward, a knife in hand, but the man sidestepped, catching the attacker's arm and twisting it. There was a sickening snap, followed by the gang member's scream of pain.

Tiffany's eyes went wide. "Cheng... you don't mean...?"

Cheng's voice dropped to a whisper, filled with a strange mix of awe and fear. "Yes."

They watched as the man in black moved through the chaos, each strike measured and brutal, his presence unmistakably lethal. One gang member managed to grab a metal pipe and swung it, but the man deflected the blow, twisting the pipe out of his hands before driving an elbow into his ribs, sending him to the ground.

One of the allied members shouted, "Get him! Take him down!"

But their desperation was palpable. The man continued to move, taking each of them down in swift, precise motions. A kick to the knee here, a strike to the throat there—he left no openings, every attack executed with deadly intent.

Cheng hesitated, then spoke, her voice barely audible above the chaos. "The man Ramsey had to stop a year ago... using everything he had. The one they called **Mid-Nite**."

Tiffany's jaw dropped as the name settled over her like a weight. Mid-Nite—a name spoken only in whispers, a ghost who had nearly toppled Ramsey's entire empire. "Mid-Nite," she repeated, the disbelief clear in her voice. "But he's supposed to be..."

"dead," Cheng finished, her tone grim. "But he's here. And if he's back..."

They watched in stunned silence as Mid-Nite moved with the fluidity of a shadow, slipping through the smoke. He took down another attacker, his fist driving into the man's stomach before flipping him to the ground with a brutal efficiency. His visor glinted in the fading smoke, his face concealed, but the aura he projected was unmistakable—cold, relentless.

The last few allied members, now fully aware of the hopelessness of the fight, tried to back away, but it was too late. One managed to get close, swinging a punch, but Mid-Nite caught his fist mid-air, twisting his arm before slamming him to the ground. Another tried to rush him from behind, only to be met with a sharp elbow to the jaw, knocking him back.

Cheng's voice was tight with tension as she muttered, "Ramsey thought he'd buried this part of his past. Clearly, he was wrong."

Tiffany stared, her breath hitching as Mid-Nite finally turned, his figure silhouetted against the smoke, the tactical suit fitting him like a second skin.

The smoke began to clear, revealing the man who had struck with such brutal precision. His figure grew sharper in the mist, each detail settling into place—the black tactical suit hugging his frame, his posture unwavering. But it was the mask that drew Tiffany's gaze, a sleek, dark visor concealing his face, adding a sense of cold mystery to his presence. Then he turned, looking directly at them, his gaze piercing through the mask, unflinching.

Before Tiffany could even process the sight, her comms crackled to life.

"Surprise," came Ramsey's familiar voice, dripping with calm satisfaction.

Cheng's jaw dropped, her voice a mixture of confusion and disbelief. "Wha... What is the meaning of this?"

Ramsey's chuckle was smooth, almost amused. "Relax. Put your faith in me—I wouldn't let any harm come to you. I always have a plan."

Cheng shook her head, still staring at the masked figure. "A plan is one thing, but this? Since when did the dead start coming back to life?"

"Oh, come now," Ramsey's voice replied, calm and knowing. "What makes you think the mantle of Mid-Nite could only be worn by one person in our entire lifetime?"

Cheng froze, piecing it together. "You mean..."

"Exactly," Ramsey said, his tone proud. "Say hello to our new Mid-Nite."

The masked man shifted, giving a small, almost sheepish wave.
"Um... hello, guys. It's me!"



Tiffany's eyes went wide, recognizing that voice beneath the mask.
"Polo? What the hell!"

Polo grinned behind the visor, but his voice was apologetic. "Yeah, I know—it's a bit of a shock. But hey, someone had to take up the legacy, right?"

Cheng blinked, speechless for a moment, then shook her head in disbelief. "Ramsey... you sent Polo out here as Mid-Nite? You know, a little warning would've been nice!"

Ramsey's voice crackled through the comms again, tinged with amusement. "Where's the fun in that? Besides, Polo's a Martial Artist. I'd say he's well-prepared."

Polo shrugged, rolling his shoulders like he was adjusting to the suit. "It's... different. But I think I can get used to this."

Tiffany stared at him, still trying to process the transformation. "And here I thought you were a ghost."

Polo chuckled, his voice muffled by the mask but carrying a playful edge. "Guess I'm full of surprises."

Cheng sighed, her skepticism still apparent. "This... this better not backfire, Ramsey."

"Oh, it won't," Ramsey replied, his confidence unwavering. "Polo's ready. And if any of our new friends here need convincing, I'd say he's already proven his point."

As Polo stood there, masked and commanding, Tiffany had to admit—he'd risen to the challenge.

They raced toward the waiting sedan, its engine already running and headlights cutting through the darkness.

Tiffany reached the car first, yanking the door open and sliding in just as Cheng and Polo followed. The moment their doors shut, Tiffany floored the gas, sending them tearing down the road and away from the dockyard.

"Everyone accounted for?" Tiffany asked, eyes still on the road.

"Alive and kicking," Cheng replied, catching her breath. "Mission complete."

Polo lifted his mask slightly, a grin flickering across his face.

"So...when do we do this again?"

Cheng smirked, her gaze steady ahead. "Sooner than you think."

The car sped through the night, leaving the danger behind—having everything they needed to put Hiram down.

Day 5

Hiram sat alone in his dimly lit quarters, the weight of the past 24 hours pressing down on him like a heavy cloak. The air was stale, and the faint hum of a distant fan did little to cut through the oppressive silence. On the desk before him, his phone buzzed and flashed with endless notifications, a symphony of demands and threats from the allied gang leaders.

He didn't dare pick it up again. He'd already seen enough.

Felix Carrillo: *"Fix this, or I'll fix you."*

Marta Delgado: *"The alliance is hanging by a thread, Hiram. You're the one holding the scissors."*

Natasha Volkov: *"You better have a damn good explanation for this. Your time's running out."*

The words were burned into his mind. Threats. Accusations. Rage. And no solutions.

He leaned back in his chair, rubbing his temples with trembling fingers. The glass of whiskey on the desk sat untouched, the amber liquid catching the faint light. For once, even the drink didn't tempt him.

"What the hell am I supposed to do now?" Hiram muttered, his voice low and strained.

His thoughts churned. The shipment was gone, and with it, his leverage. That crate hadn't just been merchandise—it had been his key to proving his worth to the allied gangs, to solidifying the fragile alliance. And now? Now he had nothing but their wrath.

"This wasn't supposed to happen," he said aloud, his voice barely more than a whisper. "Everything was planned. Everything was...controlled."

But it wasn't, was it? Not anymore.

He stared at the phone again, its incessant buzzing like a mocking laugh. Every leader from the allied gangs wanted answers—no, demanded them. And what could he say? That he'd underestimated Ramsey? That the Boss had outmaneuvered him yet again?

Hiram clenched his fists, his knuckles whitening.

"How could he pull this off?" he muttered, anger bubbling beneath his fear. "He's just one man. One man against *all of this*."

His thoughts spiraled, the blame shifting like sand. The allied leaders, their impossible demands. Ramsey, with his damn schemes. Even himself.

"Was it my fault?" he whispered, the question hanging in the air. "Did I trust the wrong people? Did I...miss something?"



He shook his head, trying to banish the self-doubt. No. He'd done everything by the book, played his part perfectly. It was Ramsey who had upset the balance, Ramsey who had thrown everything into chaos.

"And now they're all looking at me," he said bitterly, his voice rising. "Like I'm the one who failed."

He slammed his fist onto the desk, the whiskey glass trembling but not toppling. The sudden motion sent a ripple of pain through his hand, but he didn't care.

"I need to think," he muttered, standing abruptly and pacing the room. "I need...I need a plan. Something they won't see coming. Something to put me back on top."

But every idea that came to mind felt weak, incomplete. His usual confidence was shaken, replaced by an unfamiliar gnawing doubt.

"They're going to come for me," he said to himself, the words tasting bitter. "If I don't do something soon...they'll turn on me. And then..."

He didn't finish the thought. He didn't need to.

Hyrain stopped pacing, staring at the phone again. He didn't have the luxury of time. The allied leaders would demand a meeting soon, and he'd have to face them empty-handed. Unless...

Unless he found a way to turn this around.

He picked up the whiskey glass and took a long sip, the liquid burning down his throat. It didn't ease the tension, but it gave him a moment of clarity.

"No more mistakes," he muttered, setting the glass down with a firm clink. "If Ramsey wants a game, then I'll play. But this time, I'll make the rules."

The buzzing of the phone continued, but Hiram ignored it. For now, the calls could wait. He needed to think. He needed a plan. And he needed it fast.

The sound of the door creaking open startled Hiram, yanking him out of his spiraling thoughts. His body stiffened, his hand instinctively reaching for the glass of whiskey on his desk as if it could shield him from what—or who—was coming.

And then, there he was.

Ramsey stepped inside, his presence filling the room like an unwelcome storm. His steps were deliberate, his expression unreadable, but his eyes—sharp and calculating—seemed to pierce right through Hiram.

"Oh... B-Boss, it's you," Hiram stammered, rising halfway from his chair before realizing how shaky he looked. He sank back down awkwardly, wiping a bead of sweat off his temple.

Ramsey didn't respond immediately. Instead, he closed the door softly behind him, his fingers lingering on the handle for a moment longer than necessary. When he finally turned, his smile was faint, almost pleasant—but his eyes betrayed none of that warmth.

"Hello, Hiram," Ramsey said, his voice calm, conversational. "It seems you've been doing all the tough work, eh?"

"Tough work?" Hiram forced a laugh, the sound coming out more like a nervous cough. "Ah, well, you know how it is... mob life, always busy, always something to juggle, haha—"

Ramsey tilted his head, studying Hiram as if he were a puzzle with pieces missing. "Hmm. And what exactly would that be? The mob work? Or perhaps..." He gestured subtly toward the untouched phone on the desk, its screen still lit up with missed calls and threatening texts. "...managing all your new pen pals?"

Hiram's face paled. "Oh, that? Just some routine stuff. Nothing unusual. I—"

"And the sweat on your bald head?" Ramsey interrupted smoothly, his tone almost too casual. "That vein bulging on your temple? The tremor in your hands when you reached for that glass? Should I go on?"

"I-I don't know what you mean, Boss," Hiram said, his voice wobbling despite the forced smile plastered on his face. "It's

nothing! Everything's fine—just a lot of paperwork, you know how it is, haha."

Ramsey's gaze didn't waver. "Paperwork doesn't usually make a man look like he's aged ten years overnight, Hiram." He took a slow step forward, his shoes clicking softly against the floor. "Or cause 62,500 pounds to vanish from the accounts. Now, I'm sure there's a perfectly reasonable explanation for that, isn't there?"

Hiram's breath hitched. "Oh, that? Haha... nothing to worry about, Boss. Just a minor hiccup, some logistics got tangled up, but I've got it under control. Really!"

Ramsey's faint smile widened, but it didn't reach his eyes. He leaned slightly over the desk, his shadow stretching across Hiram like a physical weight.

"A minor hiccup," Ramsey repeated, his voice dropping to a near-whisper. "Is that what we're calling it? Funny, because to me, it looks a lot like panic. Like failure." He straightened up again, brushing imaginary dust off his jacket. "But I'm sure you wouldn't let me down. Not you, Hiram."

"Never, Boss!" Hiram said quickly, his laugh bordering on hysteria. "You can count on me! I've got everything under control. Completely. Absolutely."

Ramsey's expression didn't change, but his gaze lingered on Hiram for a moment longer, as if measuring the weight of his words. Finally, he nodded, stepping back toward the door.

"I'm sure you do," Ramsey said, his tone light again. "But remember, Hiram... control is only an illusion. And illusions have a nasty habit of shattering."

As Ramsey reached for the door handle, he paused, his hand hovering just long enough to make Hiram's heart stutter. Then, with a faint chuckle, Ramsey glanced over his shoulder, his smile razor-sharp.

"Huh. I wonder what that little hiccup was all about?" Ramsey mused aloud, his tone almost playful, though his eyes held none of that levity. "Funny thing... all your *pen pals* seem to have something in common. Seven, isn't it? Seven of them."

Hiram swallowed hard, his mouth suddenly dry. "I-I mean, yes, but —"

"And if I count you in that little circle," Ramsey continued, cutting him off with a wave of his hand, "and do some basic math—62,500 pounds from each one of you—it rounds up quite nicely, doesn't it?" He tilted his head, his smile growing wider. "Half a million pounds. 500,000. Now that's a tidy sum."

Hiram fidgeted, his fingers gripping the edge of his desk. "Uh, yes, but... that's not—"

"And it's funny, really," Ramsey interrupted again, his voice calm, almost amused. "The only time we spend that much money is when we're securing something... specific from our supplier." His gaze bore into Hiram, unblinking. "Coincidence?" He raised an eyebrow, his tone dropping into a quiet, chilling cadence. "I think not."

Hiram froze, his thoughts scrambling for a response, but nothing coherent came out. "Uh... Boss, I—"

"Bah," Ramsey said suddenly, waving his hand dismissively and turning back toward the door. "I guess I'm overthinking it. Funny how the mind runs wild when there's tension in the air, huh?" His laugh was soft, but it carried a weight that left Hiram's chest tightening. "I'll leave you and your *pals* alone... for now."

Ramsey opened the door, stepping out without a glance back. The door closed with an audible click, leaving Hiram alone in the deafening silence of the room.

Day 6

The warehouse door creaked open, allowing a flood of daylight to spill into the dimly lit safehouse. Ramsey entered briskly, his footsteps echoing on the concrete floor. His sharp eyes quickly scanned the room, landing on Cheng, who sat cross-legged on the table, intently focused on the holographic projection of data from the Access Card.

"Sorry, guys," Ramsey said as he approached, his tone calm but carrying a trace of weariness. "Had some business to handle at the mob."

Cheng looked up briefly, her expression neutral. "It's fine. You couldn't have helped with this anyway. I've spent the entire night here with Polo, running through the data on this card, reverse engineering, testing every angle." She sighed, her frustration evident. "Nothing works."

Ramsey leaned against a nearby crate, crossing his arms. "If we can't decrypt it, then why was Hiram so confident that he could?"

Polo, seated on a chair near the table, rubbed his temples before interjecting. "Maybe he has... something like a key? You know, to gain access?"

"A decrypter?" Ramsey suggested, narrowing his eyes.

Cheng shook her head slowly. "I doubt it. This is state-of-the-art government tech. If we can't decrypt it, even with all our resources, I highly doubt Hiram has the ability to crack it. Let's be real here."

Ramsey tilted his head thoughtfully, his eyes locked on the flickering projection. "You say that, but think about it. How could such encryption even exist? Something so advanced that it's unbreakable?"

Polo hesitated, his brows furrowing. "Maybe... the Access Card isn't encrypted at all."

Cheng blinked, startled. "What? What makes you say that?"

Polo leaned forward, his voice growing more confident. "Maybe we're overthinking this. What if our supplier—whoever they are—knew about Hiram's plans and gave him... something incomplete? What if he didn't get what he asked for?"

Ramsey's gaze sharpened. "You're saying... this is useless?"

"Not entirely," Polo replied carefully.

Cheng frowned, clearly intrigued. "What do you mean?"

Polo hesitated, his voice softening, tinged with sadness. "You remember the game me and... my brother Marco used to play with you, Ramsey?" His mention of Marco carried a heavy weight, a flicker of grief crossing his face.

Ramsey's jaw tightened, his tone low. "You don't mean to say—"

Polo nodded, a faint, knowing smile breaking through his sadness. "Exactly. This time..." He leaned back, his gaze shifting to Cheng, then to Ramsey. "The mole goes to Hiram."

The room fell silent, the tension thick in the air as the realization settled over them.

Cheng glanced at Ramsey, her expression both tense and curious. A faint smirk tugged at the corner of her lips, a silent acknowledgment of Polo's revelation. Ramsey returned the look, his steely eyes gleaming with the glimmer of a plan forming.

Heartland Safehouse

Back at the mob hideout, inside Hiram's quarters

The room felt oppressively quiet, save for the frantic pacing of Hiram, his bald head glistening with sweat. The cell phone in his hand was practically glued to his ear as he juggled call after call.

"Felix, I swear I'm working on it! You'll get your damn shipment soon. Just—"

A roar of fury erupted on the other end. "Don't give me your excuses, Hiram! My Serpents are sitting on empty docks because of your failures! Do you want me to come collect my payment from *you* directly?"

Hiram swallowed hard, switching his tone to placate. "There's no need for that, Felix. I promise it's all under control—"

"Control?" Felix spat. "You've got nothing under control. Next time, I'll send my men to remind you what happens when promises are broken!"

The call ended abruptly, leaving a deafening silence in its wake. Before Hiram could catch his breath, the phone buzzed again.

"Marta," Hiram started, but her voice cut through, venomous and unrelenting.

"You useless idiot! The Black Cobras have fronted *millions* for this alliance, and what do we have to show for it? NOTHING!"

"Marta, please—"

"No! Do you think I'm bluffing when I say I'll burn your precious Heartlands to the ground? Because I will. You're wasting my time and my patience!"

The line went dead before he could respond. The phone buzzed again almost immediately, each call draining the color from Hiram's face.

"Hiram," came a deep, gravelly voice—Big Lu, leader of the Steel Knights. His tone was deceptively calm but carried an unmistakable edge. "I've been hearing... unsettling things. Word is you're not delivering on your end. This alliance was supposed to be profitable for all of us. If you keep failing..."

"Lu, I understand—"

"No, you don't understand. If I don't see results soon, I'll bring my Knights to Leeds and make you regret every broken promise you've made."

One by one, the threats piled on. Noah "Cipher" Lee of the Midnight Syndicate demanded answers with cold precision, Diego "Bones" Martinez of the Iron Fists growled out warnings of retribution, and Natasha "Raven" Volkov of the Vipers spoke with quiet menace, her words dripping with disdain.

"You think we're here to babysit your incompetence?" Natasha hissed. "Tick-tock, Hiram. Your time is running out."

By the time the final call ended, Hiram's hands were trembling. His heart pounded as he stared at the phone, still vibrating from missed calls and buzzing with threatening texts.

"Bloody vultures..." he muttered to himself, sinking into the worn leather chair behind his desk. His mind raced with desperate ideas, each one discarded as hopeless. "What am I supposed to do now?" he whispered, running his hand over his face.

Suddenly, his phone chimed—not a call this time, but a text message. Hiram frowned, unlocking it.

It was from an unknown number.

The message had no words, only an image attachment. His breath caught as he tapped it open.

It was the Access Card.

The very card he'd spent the last week scrambling to protect.

His eyes widened in disbelief. "No... That's impossible. How—"

Another chime interrupted him. A follow-up text appeared beneath the image:

"You thought you held all the keys, Hiram. But the door is already open. Tick-tock. Watch your back."

The blood drained from his face. His hands shook as he stared at the screen, the weight of the words settling in.

Somewhere, someone had outmaneuvered him—and they were making sure he knew it.

Day 7

The room was brightly lit, papers and sticky notes plastered across a large board at the front. Strings and pins connected various locations, faces, and events—a web of chaos that Ramsey was trying to bring into focus. He stood in the center, commanding the room with a sharp presence. Cheng sat at the edge of a desk, her arms crossed. Tiffany leaned on a chair, flipping through a notepad. Polo stood near the board, eyeing it nervously but attentively.



Ramsey pointed toward the board. "All right, let's start from the beginning. What is Hiram's main objective?"

Cheng straightened, her voice crisp. "To take control of Heartlands."

"Exactly." Ramsey nodded, tapping a sticky note with Hiram's name on it. "And what is *our* objective?"

"To destroy Heartlands," Tiffany replied, her tone firm.

"Correct," Ramsey said, pacing now. "To take control, what does Hiram need?"

"The support of the allied members," Cheng chimed in.

"And why?" Ramsey shot back, his gaze intense.

"Because he needs enough backing to vote you out," Tiffany said, glancing at the board, "or, worse, remove you from the picture entirely."

"Bingo," Ramsey replied with a cold smile. "Now, let's flip it. To destroy Heartlands, what do we need?"

"The evidence of Heartlands' illegal activities," Polo said, his voice quieter than the others.

"Which Hiram conveniently has," Ramsey said, pointing to another part of the board. "And what does Hiram need to pull off his coup?"

Cheng furrowed her brow. "The Access Card."

Ramsey tapped his temple, his tone calm but deliberate. "The Access Card *we* have."

A moment of silence fell over the room as the connections became glaringly clear. Ramsey gestured toward the board, his hand tracing the tangled mess of sticky notes and strings. "Do you see the picture now?"

Tiffany tilted her head. "He has what we need, and we have what he needs."

"Exactly," Ramsey said, clapping his hands together. "So, the question isn't just *what* we do next—it's *who* makes the first move."

Cheng pushed off the desk, arms still crossed. "If Hiram's smart—and we know he is—he won't make a move until he's certain he can win. He's paranoid, Ramsey. He'll want to consolidate the allied members before going after you."

"True," Ramsey replied, pacing. "But he's also under pressure. The allied gang leaders are already breathing down his neck after that little mess we pulled yesterday."

Tiffany chimed in, flipping through her notes. "And they don't trust him. That's leverage we can use. If we can turn one or two of them against him—"

"Too risky," Cheng interrupted. "They're volatile. One wrong move, and they'll turn on us instead."

Ramsey held up a hand to stop the argument. "You're both right. But we don't need to turn anyone just yet. We just need to *distract* them long enough to secure the evidence from Hiram."

Polo raised a tentative hand. "But how do we get the evidence if it's with him? He's not exactly going to hand it over."

Ramsey smirked. "He doesn't have to. Hiram's problem is that he thinks he's untouchable. But his paranoia makes him sloppy. He'll have backups—likely digital—and he'll keep those where he feels safest. We just need to find that location."

Cheng raised an eyebrow. "And how do we do that?"

Ramsey turned to Polo, his smirk widening. "That's where our Access Card comes in. We let him think it's the key to everything, bait him into showing his hand. Once he makes a move, we follow him straight to the evidence."

Tiffany frowned. "But if we give him the card, doesn't that put us at a disadvantage?"

"Not if we control the terms," Ramsey said, pointing to her. "We'll make it look like he's won, but we'll be two steps ahead."

Cheng shook her head. "It's a gamble. What if he figures out it's a setup?"

"Then we adapt," Ramsey replied sharply. "This isn't about playing it safe. This is about finishing this. If we don't act now, Hiram consolidates power, and we lose any chance to take him down."

The room grew quiet again as everyone absorbed the plan. Ramsey looked at each of them in turn, his tone softening but retaining its edge. "We're at a crossroads here. Hiram thinks he's untouchable, but he's wrong. He's panicked, desperate. That makes him dangerous—but also predictable. If we stick to the plan, we'll bring him down, piece by piece."

Cheng nodded. "I'm in. But we'll need more intel before we can move."

"We'll get it," Ramsey replied confidently.

Tiffany smirked. "And if we don't?"

Ramsey's eyes gleamed with determination. "Then we improvise."

The room turned crimson, the light flooding every corner, washing over the walls and faces of everyone present. Cheng, Polo, and Tiffany squinted, shielding their eyes as the computer screens, keyboard lights, and even the small standby lights on devices pulsed an ominous red glow. A distorted voice echoed from the speakers, filling the air with a mechanical rasp.



"Quite an amusing plan you have there."

Ramsey's body tensed. His gaze darted to the glowing screens, his mind racing to identify the intrusion. His fingers instinctively brushed the gun at his side, but he held back, waiting.

"What the hell is this?" he snapped, his voice edged with frustration.

The others rose to their feet, scanning the room for the source.
Cheng's hand went to her sidearm, eyes narrowed and alert.

"WHO ARE YOU? AND HOW DID YOU GET ACCESS TO THIS
COMPUTER?" she demanded, her voice commanding.

The voice on the other end of the line didn't falter. "Why? The card
you so graciously inserted gave me everything I needed, of course."

Ramsey's eyes snapped to the table, where the access card now lay
innocently. His jaw tightened. "That's impossible! The encryption—"

"Oh, please," the voice interrupted with an amused laugh. "Do you
think state-of-the-art encryption means anything to someone like
me? Let's just say it was a walk in the park. But, Ramsey... you're
not the one I expected to use it."

The voice shifted, an almost mocking edge creeping in.

Ramsey's eyes narrowed. "You mean..."

"Hiram, yes. I was expecting him... hmm, but it seems I found
something far more interesting instead!"

His grip on the table tightened, the unease gnawing at the edges of
his calm. Stepping forward, his fingers flew across the keyboard,

trying to wrestle control from the intruder. But the screens flickered, their crimson glow only deepening.

"No use, 'Boss,'" the voice said, dripping with derision. "Or should I say... Ramsey? Or perhaps Raymond, Reynold, Ramon—hah, you seem fond of the letter 'R.' And yet... you have no history. That's new."

Ramsey stopped mid-type, his posture still, but his eyes icy. His voice was low, cold, cutting through the tension in the room.

"Enough games," he said, every word a sharp blade. "Who the hell are you, and what do you want?"

The voice chuckled, a grating, rasping sound that sent a shiver through the room. "I am the Supplier. And let's just say, I don't take kindly to double-crossers."

Ramsey's eyes flicked briefly to Polo, his jaw setting. "Double-crossers? Us?" He shook his head, a smirk tugging at his lips. "Don't start accusing people when you clearly don't understand the situation."

"Oh, I understand perfectly," the voice replied. "And I must say, Heartlands is quite the mess. Poor management, poor leadership... Well, what can you expect when the leader himself is actively sabotaging the entire operation?"

Tiffany shot Ramsey a wary glance, but he didn't flinch. He tilted his head slightly, his lips curling into a sharp smile.

"If Heartlands is bad for business, you must be doing cartwheels right now, hearing about our plan to dismantle it," he said, the words dripping with sarcasm. "So spare me the lecture and get to the point. What do you really want?"

The voice faltered for a brief moment, static filling the gap before it came back, its tone more composed. "...Hmm. You're quick. Fine. I want to help you. Heartlands is no longer profitable. I'd love to assist in burning it to the ground. But, of course, my services don't come for free."

Ramsey's laugh was short, harsh, and humorless. He leaned back, hands resting on the edge of the table, his eyes dark with disdain. "Oh, how generous. Here's my counteroffer—how about you crawl out of our system and let the professionals handle it ourselves? We don't need your help."

There was a long pause, the tension thick in the room. The voice returned, softer now, but the menace in it was unmistakable. "Oh... oh, that reminds me. I'm already being paid for this little cleanup job. Let's just call it clearing a bad debt from my books. So, no need to worry—I'm getting what I need either way."

Ramsey's smirk deepened as he straightened, his posture exuding confidence, even as the air felt thick with the stranger's threat. "Good for you," he said, his tone dripping with disdain. "Now, if

you're done wasting my time, maybe you'll find the door on your way out. Oh wait, you're hiding behind a computer screen because you know showing your face would be the last mistake you'd ever make."

"I don't think you know this, but Hiram has the documents you need to put down Heartlands."

Ramsey snorted, his fingers still poised over the keyboard. His eyes narrowed as he shot a glance at Polo and Tiffany, the mockery in his voice unmistakable.

"Oh, wow. Great job, Sherlock. We thought he had some children's fairy tale books up there with him."

The voice hesitated, as if trying to process the sarcasm. "You already knew?"

Ramsey leaned back, crossing his arms and exhaling slowly, the edge in his voice growing sharper.

"Oh, no, we're just really big fans of bad storytelling. You got something better to do?"

The voice sputtered but didn't back down. "I have something even better! Marco and Polo were the mole! That guy you have over there is one of the culprits!"

Ramsey blinked slowly, rolling his eyes. He leaned forward again, his fingers tapping rhythmically on the table.

"Mate, we already went through that last week. Are you just reading a week-old script or something?"

The voice faltered for a second, then came back, this time with a more frantic edge. "Oh... then... um... the seven rival gang members are the ones who chipped in to pay and now they're pretty mad at Hiram. Take that to your advantage."

Ramsey's hands dropped to his sides as he leaned back in the chair, exhaling a long, exasperated breath.

"Oh my God, we KNOW, alright? We've been living this nightmare for days. Please, stop with the obvious, we're not impressed!"

There was a long pause, filled only with the sound of static as the voice seemed to scramble for something new. "What?! But how can this be?! Alright, I'll do you one better! Hiram wanted to use the card to access my network and steal everything from me!"

Ramsey's eyes narrowed, his patience wearing thin. He leaned closer to the screen, his voice calm but cutting.

"Look, we're not playing *Top 100 Useless Facts We Already Know About* . Just... just get off the system, mate!"

The voice crackled angrily. "WELL, I WOULD HAVE HAD ALL THE INFORMATION HAD YOU LET HYRAM GET HOLD OF THIS CARD SO THAT I COULD ACCESS HIS SYSTEM!"

Ramsey's lips curled into a thin smile, his amusement tinged with frustration. He gestured to the screen, as if addressing the invisible figure on the other end.

"Mate, listen up. We ain't got time to waste, so how about you get out of here and stop wasting our time, alright? We don't need your amateur hour commentary. The fact that you're still talking is the most entertaining thing you've done today!"

The voice seemed to stutter, its static growing louder, but Ramsey didn't wait for it to finish. He turned to his team, rolling his eyes as he exhaled a sharp, humorless laugh.

"Well, that was... productive."

Tiffany shot him a glance, her lips twitching in an effort to hide her smile. "What was that? Some sort of low-budget villain monologue?"

Ramsey leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms. His voice was dripping with sarcasm. "Yeah, pretty much. Unfortunately, the villain is still working on their script, and we're stuck with it."

As the system fell silent, Ramsey let out a long sigh, wiping a hand down his face in exasperation.

"Let's get back to real work. The rest of the world's problems aren't going to solve themselves."

Polo, still standing near the table, looked from Ramsey to the blank screen. "So... no more fun chats with mystery voices?"

Ramsey smirked, rising to his feet and glancing at the team. "Not unless they stop reading from *Clichés for Dummies*."

Cheng leaned against the wall, her eyes narrowed as she absorbed Ramsey's words. "Back to our problems. What's the plan?"

Ramsey's lips curled into a faint smirk, a trace of satisfaction still lingering from his encounter with the voice. "Well, talking to that *'friend'* of ours was at least productive."

Cheng raised an eyebrow, clearly skeptical. "Hah, what do you mean? How so?"

Ramsey's gaze flickered to the table, his mind still processing the conversation. "Remember what he said? If Hiram had used the card, the Supplier would have access to everything."

Tiffany crossed her arms, her eyes sharp. "And so we just need to give Hiram what he wants?"

Ramsey shook his head slowly, his expression hardening. "Not so soon. Not today." He paused, his voice lowering as he focused on the task ahead. "Next week. We will end this next week."

Cheng stepped forward, sensing the shift in Ramsey's tone. "The Heartlands?"

Ramsey nodded once, his eyes glinting with resolve. "The Heartlands will go down next week. And I have just the plan."

Ramsey's eyes narrowed as he heard the distinct sound of footsteps approaching the door. He straightened up, his posture shifting from casual to alert.

Ramsey glanced over at Polo. "But before that, it seems we already have guests. Polo, go hide, quick!"

Polo hesitated. "But why?"

Ramsey shot him a sharp look. "Quickly, do as I say!"

Polo scrambled toward an empty cupboard and ducked inside.

The door creaked open, and in stepped Captain Davis, his face as stern as ever.

Ramsey raised an eyebrow, feigning surprise. "Oh, Captain Davis, you're healthy again?"

Davis stood tall, his eyes burning with frustration. "Yes, and it seems you still can't back your words."

Ramsey sighed, leaning back in his chair. "Ah, about Heartlands... I know I said I'd stop it this week, but some things happened, and I couldn't."

Davis clenched his fists, his voice rising. "Enough! I had to delay attacking all their branches just because you said, 'believe me, this, believe me that!' All words and no action!"



Ramsey shrugged, his voice casual but laced with underlying tension. "Ah, about Heartlands... I know I said I'd stop it this week, but some things came up, and I couldn't. Rome wasn't built in one day."

Davis scowled, his anger rising. "Well, Rome didn't have to put on a single brick in 20 years!" He took a step forward, his finger pointed

accusingly at Ramsey. "And you, Lt. Cheng... I expected more from you than working with this good-for-nothing lunatic who puts everyone's life on the line just to do what he wants!"

Cheng opened her mouth to respond but hesitated as Davis's fury continued to spill out.

Davis turned sharply to Tiffany. "And you, Tiffany? You should be at James's side right now! He's in a coma, for crying out loud! Did you even go see him once since you came back from Nepal?"

Tiffany's face flushed, guilt creeping into her features. "I... um..." Her voice trailed off as the weight of Davis's accusation sank in.

Before the tension could escalate further, Ramsey stepped in, his tone suddenly sharp, cutting through the tension.

Ramsey looked directly at Davis. "Would James want Tiffany to stop doing the right thing just so she could sit beside him for a little while longer?" His voice was unyielding, eyes locked with Davis's.

"Taxpayer money isn't a joke to be wasted on something so selfish. James knew that better than anyone."

Davis scoffed, crossing his arms. "And you're not!?" His voice was dripping with contempt. "You think you're any better than the system you claim to fight against?"

Ramsey's patience finally snapped. His eyes blazed as he took a step forward, closing the distance between him and Davis.

Ramsey's voice was low but seething with years of frustration. "For 20 years, Davis! 20 years I had no support! All I had was a handful of government warehouse access and some databases that amounted to nothing—until now!" His words were like daggers, aimed straight at Davis. "Do you have any idea what that feels like? To be left alone to build something from nothing, while everyone else turned their backs on me?" His voice shook with raw anger. "I built this empire from scratch, Davis. And the moment I took control, everyone scattered. I don't blame you for that—no, I get it."

He exhaled sharply, his hands clenched at his sides. The anger surged through him again. "But that's what needed to happen. Yeah, I built Heartlands on black money, but it wasn't blood money, Davis. Do you hear me?" His voice rose, practically growling with the weight of his words. "I did what I had to do to survive! And you don't have a damn clue how much it pains me to even think about destroying what I've built. But if it comes down to it, I'll burn it all to the ground. On my terms, not yours, not anyone else's."

For a moment, Davis stood frozen, the force of Ramsey's words hitting him. He looked taken aback, clearly struggling to process Ramsey's resolve.

Davis shook his head, his voice tight with disbelief. "And you think this is about you? You think we're supposed to just accept whatever you decide, just because you built some 'empire'?"

Ramsey's laugh was bitter, hollow. "You still don't get it, do you?" His voice turned sharp. "I didn't ask for this. I didn't ask to lead. And I didn't ask for this mess that Heartlands became. But I did what I had to do. I fought to keep this going when everyone else bailed. And if you think I'm going to sit here and listen to you lecture me on action, then you can go back to playing government politics. At least I'm doing something real."

He stepped back, exhaling deeply. "Cheng, Tiffany—they're not the problem. If you want to point fingers, start looking in the mirror. Tiffany's given more than you'll ever understand, and Cheng—she's been with me through it all. She's made decisions that would've broken lesser men. They're loyal, Davis. They're doing their part. So don't you dare question their commitment."

Tiffany met Ramsey's gaze, a mix of gratitude and determination in her eyes. She wasn't going to let Davis's words define her.

Tiffany spoke softly, but her voice carried strength. "I didn't forget about James. But there's more to this, more than just sitting by his side. I have a duty, just like you. I'm doing what I have to, for all of us."

Cheng's voice was firm, cutting through the tension. "And you don't get to come in here and point fingers at anyone, Davis. You want results? We'll give you results. But don't think we're all just sitting around waiting for your orders. You think you're the only one who's been through hell?"

Davis took a step back, his mouth tightening, searching for the words but finding none. The tension hung heavy in the air, his anger fading into something colder, resigned.

Ramsey's eyes never left him. "You've had your say, Captain. If you want to help, there's a time and place for that. If not, you can leave now. The plan moves forward with or without you."

Davis looked between Ramsey, Cheng, and Tiffany, his face unreadable, before giving a curt nod. "Next week, then." His voice was cold, dismissive.

The door slammed behind him.

Ramsey let out a long, controlled breath, his tension easing just slightly. He turned back to Cheng and Tiffany, a small measure of appreciation in his features.

"Alright," he said, his voice steady, "Let's get to work."

Cheng nodded, her eyes meeting his with a shared understanding, while Tiffany gave a small, weary smile.

The room fell silent after Captain Davis slammed the door behind him. Ramsey exhaled sharply, shaking off the last remnants of his frustration. But then, from the direction of the cupboard, a muffled voice cut through the air.

Polo: "Uh, Boss? A little help here?"

Ramsey's brows furrowed as he turned, eyes narrowing in confusion. "What the hell...?"

Polo: "I... I'm kinda stuck in here." The voice was more strained now, the sound of something shifting inside the small cupboard. "It's... it's tighter than I thought. My legs are—"

Tiffany raised an eyebrow, glancing toward the cupboard. "What did you do this time, Polo?"

Ramsey shook his head, fighting back a grin. "Polo, I told you to hide. I didn't tell you to start a new life in there."

Polo: "I swear, it wasn't this cramped when I crawled in! Boss, come on, help me out! I can't feel my feet!"

Cheng couldn't suppress her laughter. "Maybe we should just leave him in there as punishment for whatever he's done to deserve this."

Polo: "I swear I'll never do it again! Just get me out of here!"

Ramsey walked over to the cupboard, giving it a firm tap. "Alright, alright. Hold still." He pulled open the door, revealing Polo, wedged awkwardly inside with his limbs twisted in all directions, his face red from the effort.

Ramsey chuckled. "Well, looks like we've got a new record for 'worst hiding spot'."

Polo let out a groan. "Next time, I'm just gonna sit behind a curtain like a normal person."

Tiffany smirked. "Yeah, sure. Until you trip over the curtain rod and knock down the whole shelf."

Polo's eyes widened. "Oh God, don't even joke about that!"

The evening had settled over Leeds Dock, a quiet hum coming from the small boats gently rocking in the water. Ramsey stood at the edge, his eyes distant, focused on the movement of the boats and the city lights that flickered in the distance. He was lost in thought, his mind tracing the complex web of their plans, the risks, and the constant shifting of alliances. He had his doubts, but his resolve was unshakable. There was no turning back now.



Footsteps approached, breaking the stillness. Cheng stepped beside him, her eyes scanning the water before they landed on him. She was silent for a beat, allowing him the space to gather his thoughts, then spoke up, her voice quiet but direct.

Cheng: "Alone again?"

Ramsey gave a half-hearted chuckle, his gaze never leaving the water. "Heh, aren't I always?"

She studied him for a moment, a knowing look in her eyes. "Maybe... but not always."

Ramsey glanced at her, a slight shift in his expression, but the words that followed were light. "Well, I would like to thank you for

supporting me, even though the government turned its back on me."

Cheng waved him off dismissively, but there was a warmth in her eyes. "Oh hush with all these waterworks. We've faced some ancient witch, Khan, the Trials, and shadows in Nepal—all of it, together. We're not leaving you to face this alone now."

Ramsey allowed himself a brief smile, a rare expression of appreciation. "Heh, that means a lot."

Cheng paused before she asked the next question, clearly weighing her words. "I wanted to ask you something."

Ramsey: "Hmm, what is it?"

Cheng: "About Polo. You gave him the Mantle of Mid-Nite. It was reckless, even for you. You don't trust anyone. Why would you trust him?"

Ramsey exhaled deeply, his expression hardening as his thoughts shifted. He let his eyes linger on the waves. "I don't trust him, not fully. But I gave him the Mantle, not the tech, not the equipment. Those are things he'll have to earn. But... if he proves himself, why not?"

Cheng's brow furrowed, skepticism clear on her face. "But you know his background. You can't just hand something this important to anyone. Especially someone with his past."

Ramsey's lips twitched slightly, as if he were about to laugh at the irony of it all. "I see the kindness in him, along with the fire that burns. That same fire that burned inside me when I was chosen to be a double agent. It's not just about being ruthless—it's about understanding why we fight. Polo's been through his own battles, and he's got the grit. The fighting part? He can handle that. It's the other stuff I'm more interested in."

Cheng's eyes softened just a fraction. "I get it. But it's still risky. We can't afford mistakes right now."

Ramsey nodded, his expression darkening as he considered her point. "Sometimes we have to take risks. That's what got me where I am now. If we don't take chances, we'll never find the right people."

There was a long pause as Cheng mulled over his words. Then, she spoke again, quieter this time, almost as if she were trying to understand his thinking.

Cheng: "You're not the kind to put your trust in anyone easily. So why him?"

Ramsey turned to face her, his features sharp, his eyes steady. The water rippled under the dim light of the dock, and the faint glow from the boats cast a soft shadow on his face.

Ramsey: "In the end... we need a wildcard. Someone who operates outside the law. We've already got our superheroes—Ahnaf, Eric, and James. They can work in the light. They're powerful, they're

respected, and they'll take the risks that come with being seen. But we need someone who can function in the shadows, someone willing to do what's necessary without the limitations or rules that others face."

Cheng blinked in surprise. "Woah, you've thought that far ahead?"

Ramsey didn't smile, but there was a faint edge of pride in his voice as he nodded. "I did. And you know what I see?"

Cheng: "What?"

Ramsey's eyes sharpened as he took a step closer, his voice becoming more deliberate, more certain.

Ramsey: "I see three distinct roles in this fight. **Three groups**, each playing a critical part in our mission."

Cheng raised an eyebrow, intrigued despite herself. "Three groups?"

Ramsey: "Yes. First, the **Heroes**—the ones working in the light. Ahnaf, Eric, and James. They're the ones who go head-to-head with the system, who fight for justice and maintain the public image. The world needs them, and they're the ones people look to when things go right. But the thing is, the world can only see the light. There's always something behind the scenes."

He shifted slightly, his gaze moving out over the water again, as if envisioning something greater.

Ramsey: "Second, the **Agents**—the ones working in the grey. That's us. The people who work in the shadows, gathering intel, making connections, manipulating the pieces on the board. We operate under the radar, bending the rules when necessary to push the mission forward. It's not glamorous, but it's effective. And sometimes, the world needs a little bending."

Cheng nodded slowly, absorbing the weight of what he was saying.

Ramsey: "And third, the **Vigilantes**—the ones working in the dark. They do what needs to be done when no one else can. They're outside the law, unbound by the restrictions the government, the public, or even our own agents work under. They're the ones who strike from the shadows, dealing with things that can't be cleaned up by regular methods. They're dangerous, but they're necessary. We need someone like Polo—someone willing to get their hands dirty without hesitation."

Cheng stared at him, stunned by the depth of his plan. "You thought of all this?"

Ramsey met her eyes, unwavering. "I did. Because in the end, it's all about balance. The world needs these three forces working in tandem, each with their own strengths and weaknesses. But they all have the same goal: protecting our people, keeping the world safe. If we can pull this off, we'll have a system where each piece plays its part without interfering with the others. It's the only way."

Cheng let out a low whistle, impressed despite herself. "Guess you really have thought this through, huh?"

Ramsey's gaze softened just a fraction, the tension in his shoulders easing slightly. "We don't have the luxury of half-measures anymore."

Cheng didn't respond immediately, but she gave him a nod of respect. "Alright, then. Let's make sure all these pieces stay in place."

Ramsey gave her a quick, sharp nod. "That's the plan....."

As the last of the light from the setting sun faded behind the horizon, the quiet hum of the dock seemed to echo the silent weight of the decisions Ramsey had just laid out. The night stretched before them like a dark canvas, and the possibilities, both grim and hopeful, loomed large.



Cheng stood beside him for a long moment, both of them silent as the distant sound of the boats bobbing in the water filled the air. The city around them was alive, but the world felt like it had slowed, held together by fragile threads that Ramsey was now working to weave into something greater. Something he could control.

He knew that the road ahead would be filled with shadows and uncertainty. But for the first time in a long while, there was a faint flicker of hope beneath the weight of his burden.

Ramsey: "Tomorrow's a new day. A new dawn."

Cheng glanced at him, the faintest hint of a smile tugging at her lips. "Let's make sure it's one worth seeing."

Ramsey's eyes were fixed on the horizon, a quiet determination in his gaze. As the first stars began to twinkle above, he could almost feel the turning of the tides. The night had come, but a new day was on its way. And this time, he wouldn't face it alone.

The dawn would rise, whether it brought light or darkness. But Ramsey was ready for it. Ready to lead them all into it.

